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This One Goes To The Game Devs

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @TheRealAndyMc

For the longest time, whenever I was asked what my desert island game would be, I would reply, "Does my island have internet, and can Battle.net be my game?" It may not have the sweeping library of Steam, but Blizzard's catalogue could easily entertain me until the end of time. So, when we got the opportunity to do three cover-length features in one issue on the upcoming World of Warcraft: Shadowlands, Overwatch 2, and Diablo IV (with collectible covers and a bonus feature on Hearthstone's new expansion, Descent of Dragons), *Game Informer* jumped at the chance.

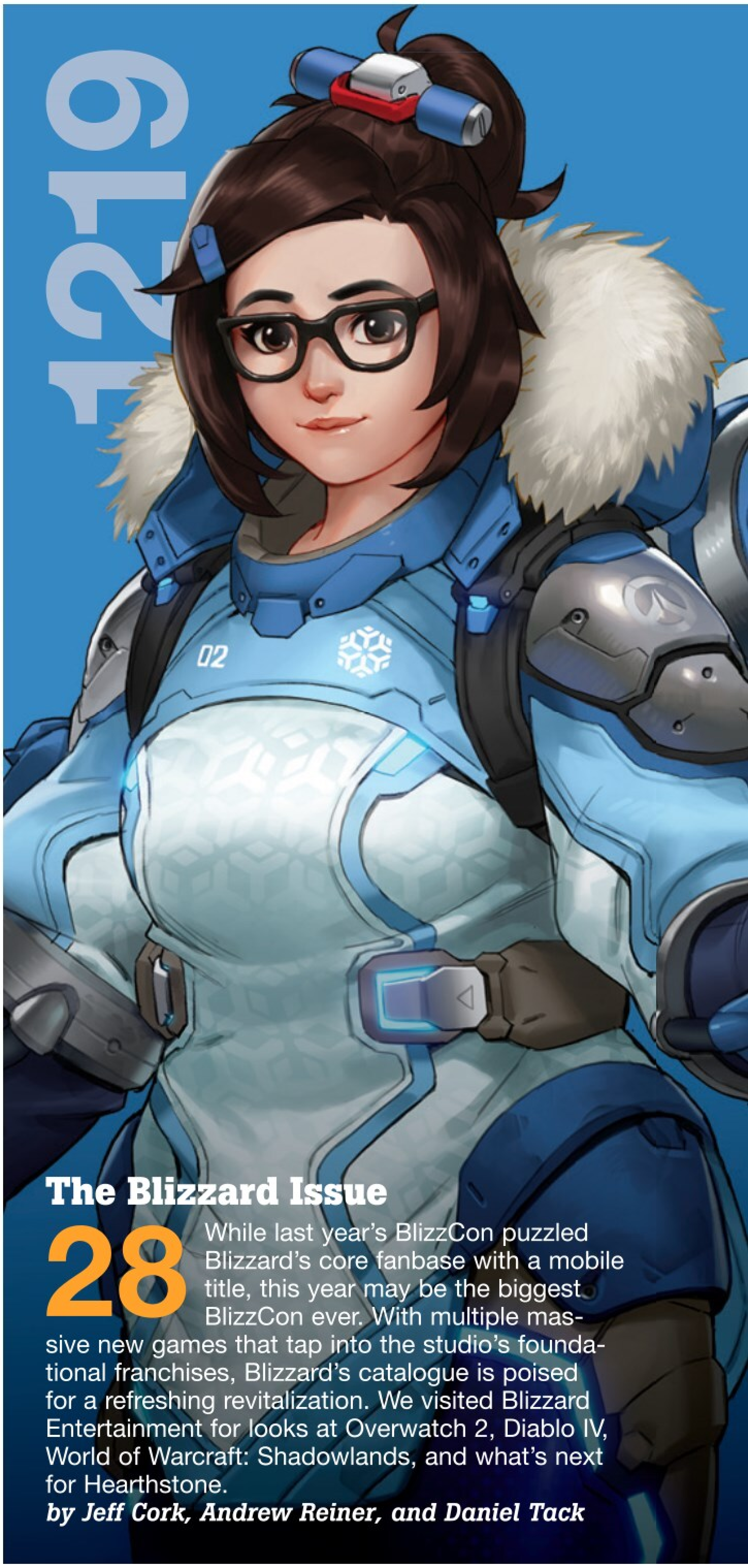
During our visit to Blizzard's studio, controversy broke out when a professional Hearthstone player from Hong Kong named Ng Wai "Blitzchung" Chung used a pro-democracy battlecry during a post-game interview. Bans were issued, a decision that upset many members of the community, who accused Blizzard of choosing profits over free speech. A roller coaster of events followed, including calls for boycotts and U.S. senators and representatives sending a letter to Activision CEO Bobby Kotick expressing concerns. Combined with the drama the NBA has been facing with its business in China, the issue has become worldwide news.

We at *Game Informer* believe in free speech. Blizzard's response to Blitzchung and what followed has been the focus of a lot of attention and anger, but it was also decided above the heads of the people putting in the daily work to create the games we love. In this issue, we celebrate those games and the people who bring joy into the world by developing them. I want people in this industry to be free to speak up for their beliefs, and I know there are hardworking developers at Blizzard whose work shouldn't be judged for corporate decisions beyond their control.

It is a complicated topic, and one that is difficult to cover in a simple letter. But I want people to know *Game Informer* stands for free speech, supports fair conversation, and also respects the hard work and passion that is difficult to put into perspective during these turbulent times.

Be good to each other.

Cheers,



The Blizzard Issue

28 While last year's BlizzCon puzzled Blizzard's core fanbase with a mobile title, this year may be the biggest BlizzCon ever. With multiple massive new games that tap into the studio's foundational franchises, Blizzard's catalogue is poised for a refreshing revitalization. We visited Blizzard Entertainment for looks at Overwatch 2, Diablo IV, World of Warcraft: Shadowlands, and what's next for Hearthstone.

by Jeff Cork, Andrew Reiner, and Daniel Tack

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THE BLIZZARD ISSUE
DIABLO IV
gameinformer
THE BLIZZARD ISSUE
WORLD OF WARCRAFT SHADOWLANDS
gameinformer
THE BLIZZARD ISSUE
OVERWATCH 2

All four collectible covers for The Blizzard Issue

10 **Standing Up** Diversity in developers means diversity in experiences, which breeds better games. That's the mantra of new studio Brass Lion.

16 **The 2019 Holiday Buyer's Guide** To get something you have to give something.

70 **The Last Of Us Part II** Ellie and Joel are back, but nobody can ever be the same again.

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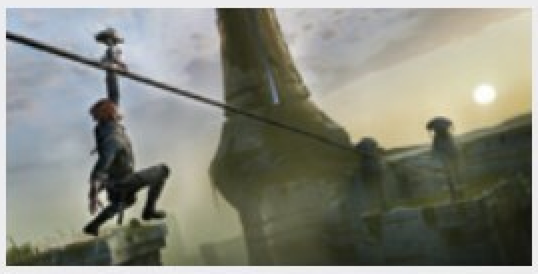
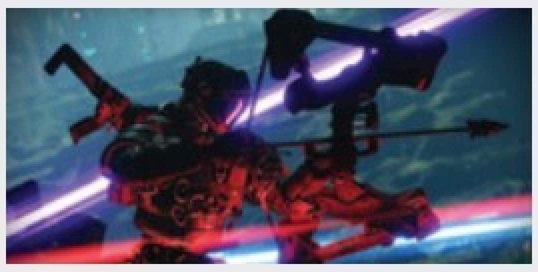


72 **Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order** Experience the aftermath of the Emperor's purge of the Jedi Order in Respawn's action title.

77 **Trials Of Mana** We go hands-on and talk with the team behind the long-awaited 3D remake.

84 **The Outer Worlds** Jump into Obsidian's irreverent world full of freedom and fun.



85 **Destiny 2: Shadowkeep** Shadowkeep is a great tentpole for the living game, whether you're a vet or a new recruit.

91 **John Wick Hex** This game slows down the assassin's action, but loses none of the excitement.

92 **Luigi's Mansion** The other plumber is up to the task of tackling this haunted hotel.

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Pokémon, cooperative play, and a general disgust for various developer practices were all discussed this month. Someone also admitted to spending over 2,000 hours in Overwatch.

Extinction Event

I just read your excellent coverage of Pokémon Sword and Shield, and wanted to extend an idea to Game Freak. People are upset that not all of the Pokémon are in the game, so why not make some of them extinct within the story? Yes, this is a bit dark of an idea, but it's happening every day in our world with fires and hunters, and would just be a reflection of that. Sorry, Bulbasaur, but your forest burned down and your species is no more. Fans can't get angry with canonical reasons, right?

Kelly Dubrow
Rockville, IL

I'm asking my parents to get me Pokémon Sword and Shield, and I really want to get the new Switch Lite that is themed after the game, but that would mean I'm not truly getting my first console Pokémon game. That system cuts out the TV connection, thus making it another handheld-only game for people with Lite.

Jimmie Schoen
Atlanta, GA

I don't know if I like the idea of Pokémon growing super large. Isn't that just like baseball players using steroids? Is Pikachu now like Barry Bonds? Will we have to put an asterisk next to Ash's first victory now that Pikachu is juicing?

D. Train
via email

That was the best Pokémon coverage I've ever seen, but you didn't answer one burning question that we all need to know: Do I buy Sword or Shield? I like the look of the Pokémon holding the sword, but is that enough? The shield one looks like he accidentally got his head stuck in a piece of metal. Not a good look.

"The Phoenix"
via email

We've always wondered which version of the Pokémon games sells better, but we doubt there's much of a difference between Red or Blue or Black or White. With Sword and Shield, there could be a huge gulf between them, as Sword is clearly the best (and only) option. You can make up any excuse you want about being virtuous and wanting to provide protection to others with the shield, but nothing (and we mean nothing) beats a dog-wolf-thing holding a sword in its mouth.

Best Year Ever

I'm concerned 2020 will be the best year ever for video games. I know that should be a good thing, but I fear I won't have the money or time to play through all of the great games like The Last of Us Part II, Marvel's Avengers, and Cyberpunk 2077, AND have the money to buy the new PlayStation and Xbox consoles. Can we officially add a 13th month called Gametober where we just play games and don't have to go to work or do home stuff?

Josie Williams
Castle Rock, CO

Seeing a game like Doom Eternal slide out of a light holiday season into a busy spring timeframe is a bit frustrating, but we have a feeling there will be a calm before the storm leading up to the launch of the new consoles, meaning we should have a month or two of light releases to dive into our back catalog to catch up.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Stop Smashing?

I love Super Smash Bros. Ultimate and I'm so hyped about Terry Bogard coming in November. However, one thing scares me: more DLC. I don't know how to feel about more fighters joining the battle. This brings so many questions. Who's next? Crash? Tracer? Goku?! I want to hear your opinion on this.

Mikey S.
via email

We'd love to see Nintendo hit 100 playable characters in Smash Ultimate. Crash Bandicoot makes the most sense and would be an awesome addition to the roster. Adding Goku is a good idea just to shut Dragon Ball fans up for a few months. If we had a say in who would be next, we'd go with Pyramid Head from the Silent Hill games. If Mario really thinks he's that tough, let's see him square off against that demon.

Take A Year Off

Just read your review of Madden 20 and I had a thought. Has there ever been talk in the industry to take a year off from certain sports franchises and sell a digital roster update the following year (for $24.95 for example) with one or two additional incentives for the buyer? My thinking is this idea would give developers time to create all new features or even do a complete rebuild. I sometimes have a difficult time justifying 60 dollars each year for a new sports title.

John Guerini
Fayetteville, WV

We doubt we'll see a publisher risk taking a year off with one of its flagship titles. What's more likely is yearly installments being handled by different development studios, which would in turn give them additional years to focus on their respective year. Activision does this with the annualized Call of Duty games. Treyarch, Infinity Ward, and Sledgehammer Games each get roughly three years to work on their Call of Duty titles.

Forced Cooperative Play

Me and my little brother just finished Super Mario Odyssey, and we both loved it. We played co-op together where I was Mario and he was Cappy. We have played the Mario games together since the Wii, and were disappointed when we could not have our own freedom and it brought down the entire experience. I feel like this co-op was forced to be a feature they could put on the back of the cover. I am excited but also worried about Gooigi in Luigi's mansion. We both want to play it, but I am worried that it might bring down the experience a bit. Any thoughts on the topic?

Sam R.
via email

Luigi's Mansion 3 doesn't phone in cooperative play, and allows for two players to work their way through the most of the campaign. On top of that, there's also a separate cooperative mode called ScareScraper that you can sink plenty of time into. Most importantly, the game is damn good. Check out Brian Shea's full review on page 92 for the not-so-frightful details of this Switch exclusive.

Finish The Game First

I'm so tired of developers taking shortcuts and rushing games to release, resulting in bugs and problems, and then fixing them AFTERWARDS.

David Novick
Howard Beach, NY

We agree that being a day-one adopter is a bit of a gamble, and some release dates should probably be pushed back, but post-release patching is a great thing. Developers tweak balance based on player feedback, more polish is added, and the game ultimately gets better.

Fuller House

I read your story on Shenmue III, and it didn't make me excited for the game, and instead turned me on to *Fuller House* and *The Blacklist*. I will now be buying Shenmue III as a thank you to Yu Suzuki for his television show recommendations.

Nathan Wells
Athens, GA

A note to developers: If you can't convince people your game is worth playing, tell them what they should be watching on Netflix. Instant sale.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Could you please tell my friends that Dark Souls II isn't trash?"

Game Informer gave that game a glowing review of 9.75 out of 10. It even has a cool headline that says, "Praise the Fun." You can blame Dan Tack for that one.

"Do you know any acting agency to go to because I want to start a career."

Prestige Worldwide can handle all of your career needs.

"They fix those Avengers faces yet? Yuck."

We think you're referring to the character models in Crystal Dynamics' Avengers game, and the answer is kind of. The characters looked a little better in their New York Comic Con appearance compared to their E3 debut.

Question Of The Month:

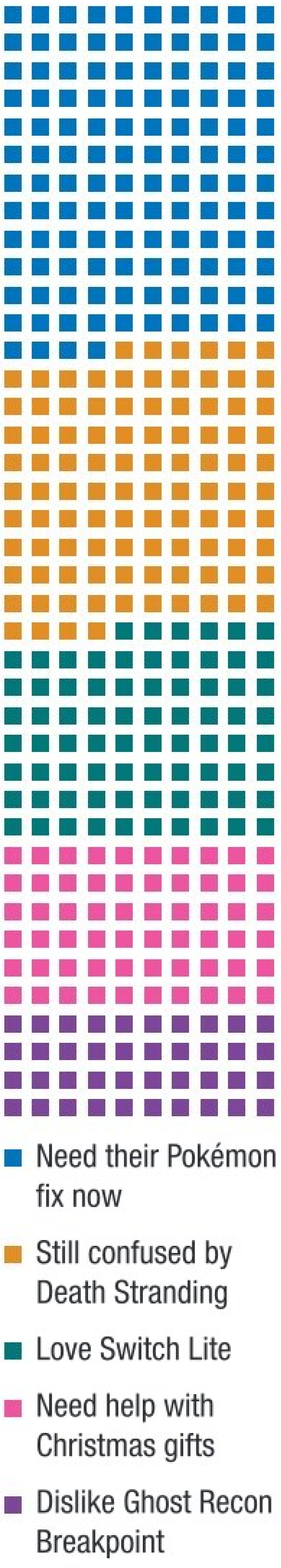
Are you going to give Google Stadia a chance?

gi spy

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) Ben and Leo met up with the Diablo IV lords of dorkness. That statue in the back is actually a costume used to promote the first game. **(Right)** Reiner and Leo hung out in fake Paris with Blizzard's Aaron Keller, Jeff Kaplan, and Chacko Sonny. Get the full details on Overwatch 2 on page 42.

On Your Mind



A Good Obsession

In issue 319, we asked readers what game they sunk the most hours into. Here are some of the standout responses. Brace for shocking amounts of time.

I've really had to think hard on this. The first one that comes to mind is definitely Overwatch. I've been sucked in since day one. Over 2,000 hours easy. All time? I'd have to definitely say either Pokémon Leaf Green or Dark Cloud 2. Especially since I'm STILL playing them after all these years.

Amber Moore

I am always terrified to type in "/played" in World of Warcraft or "/playtime" in Final Fantasy XIV because I am a little ashamed of how much time I have put into these games. They would be the winners hands down. There is just something about the MMOs and all the people running around sharing the world with you. Some of my best memories in life have happened in those games. Do what you enjoy, right?

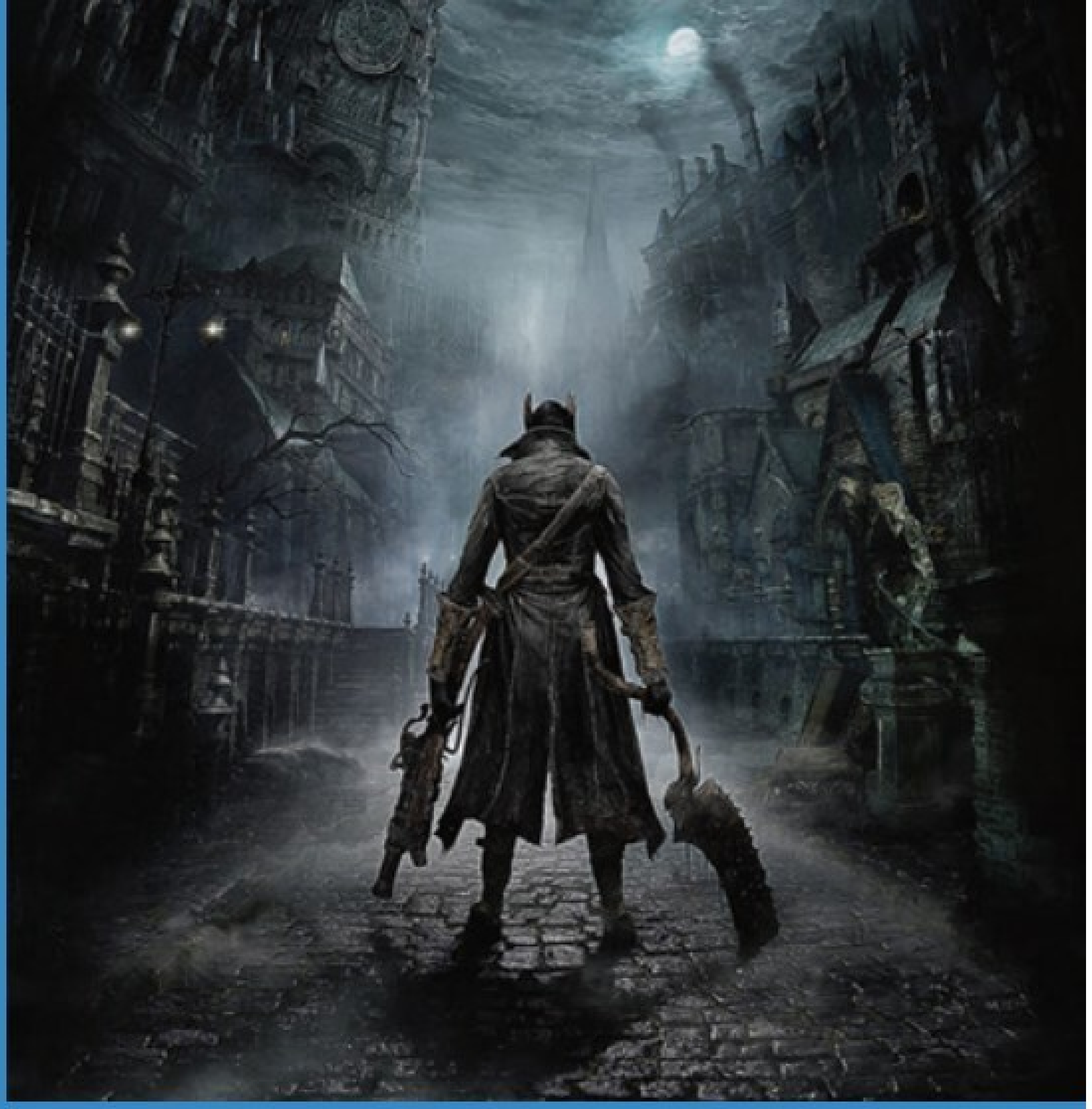
Jeremy Amacher

Kingdom Hearts II is the game I've put so many hours into. From playing it for the first time on PS2, to getting it on my PS3, Kingdom Hearts II is my favorite game, and I've never gotten tired of playing it. Kind of ironic how I beat III, and haven't touched it since.

Kris Thompson

I bought Assassin's Creed Odyssey months after it released as a filler to get me through the summer months, until the big fall releases. To my surprise, the game was significantly better than Origins. I have blown off a few games that I own (Madden 20, Anthem, Rage 2) because I am still engulfed in the world of Odyssey. Being a completionist, I am worried that I will be playing this game well into the holidays, but it is worth it. The game is great ... and ... it's soooo hard to ignore a "?" on the map, right?

Gerell Elie



The game that I've probably sunk the most time into so far has been The Division 2. As I am a lifelong resident of the Baltimore/DC region it's awesome to have a game based this close to home. Many people come down on the game due to screwy decisions by the developers, but it all settles down over time. It's a beautiful game with easy-to-learn mechanics and support for both old and new mechanics. The thing that helps to ruin the experience for many is the elitists who forget that they were once at the bottom and had to learn how to play games like this. One of the major concepts behind online gaming is sociability. We all have fun together even if that means getting together to wipe some jerk off the map ... continuously.

Shawn, 38

I would have to say Bloodborne. I clocked close to 400 hours into that game with various builds. The game is outstanding. Nothing like the countless hours put in to level up your character just to be one-hit killed by a boss ... the agony. Not to mention the rush of invading other players world's and engage in a stress-inducing PvP match while trying to use mobs to your advantage, especially in chalice dungeons.

Marco "GOW" Bishay

THE LAST OF US
PART II

(Left) With Pokémon Sword and Shield right around the corner, Shea once again caught up with director Shigeru Ohmori and producer Junichi Masuda. **(Right)** Ben Reeves used his final genie wish to create a logo above the head of co-director Kurt Margenau as a way of remembering what game he works on.

(continued on page 8)

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gallery

WINNER

1 Thomas Ingram

Somehow, this artist was able to transport directly into Reiner's subconscious and return with what he saw. Uncanny!

2 Krys Lesser

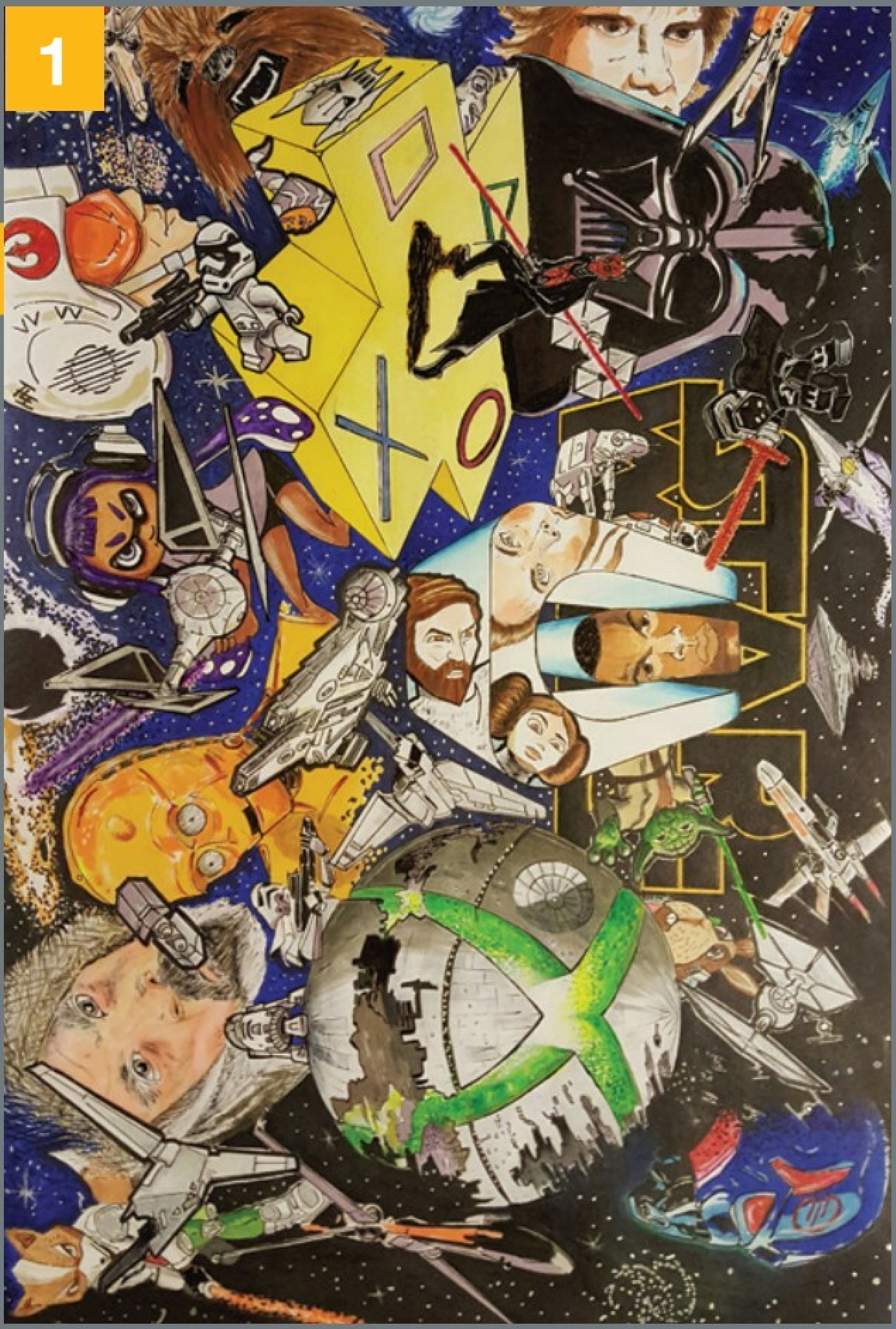
Eevee shows off its Halloween evolution.

3 Michael Palache

Now we finally have an answer to the question, "What's the stuffing inside of Sackboy?" It's pink fluff. Right?

4 Hailey Rodriguez

Oh. Well. Um. Er… You all right there, Mario?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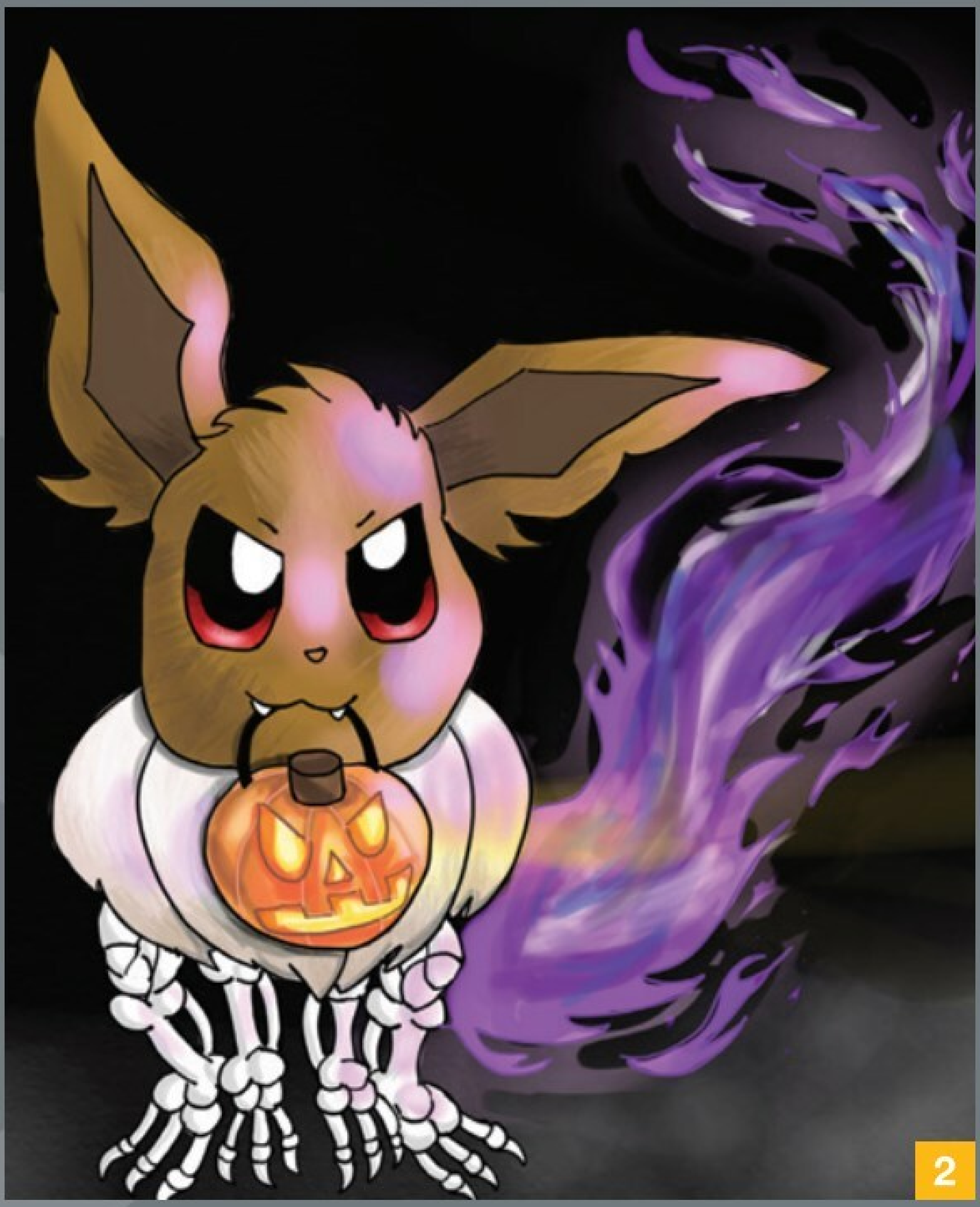
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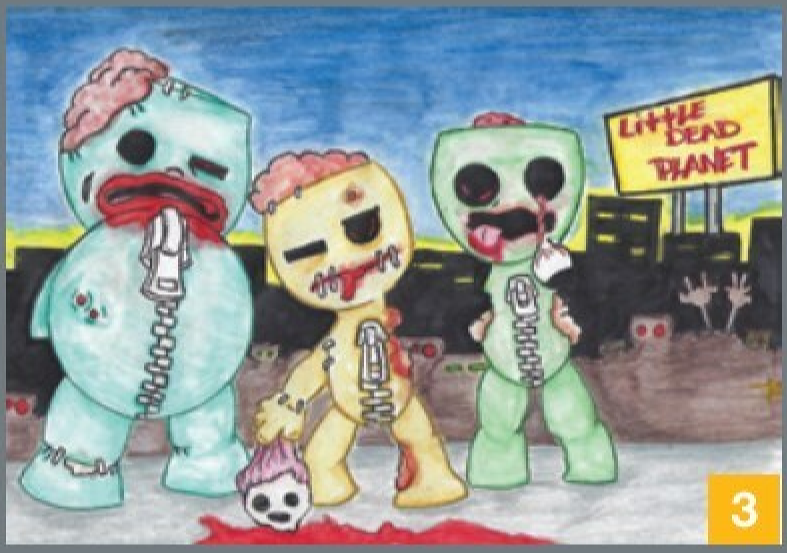
LITTLE DEAD PLANET
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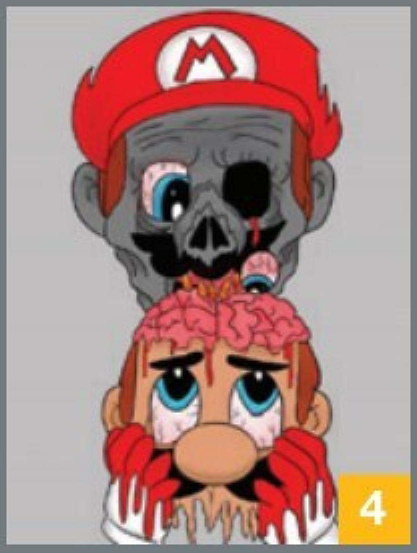

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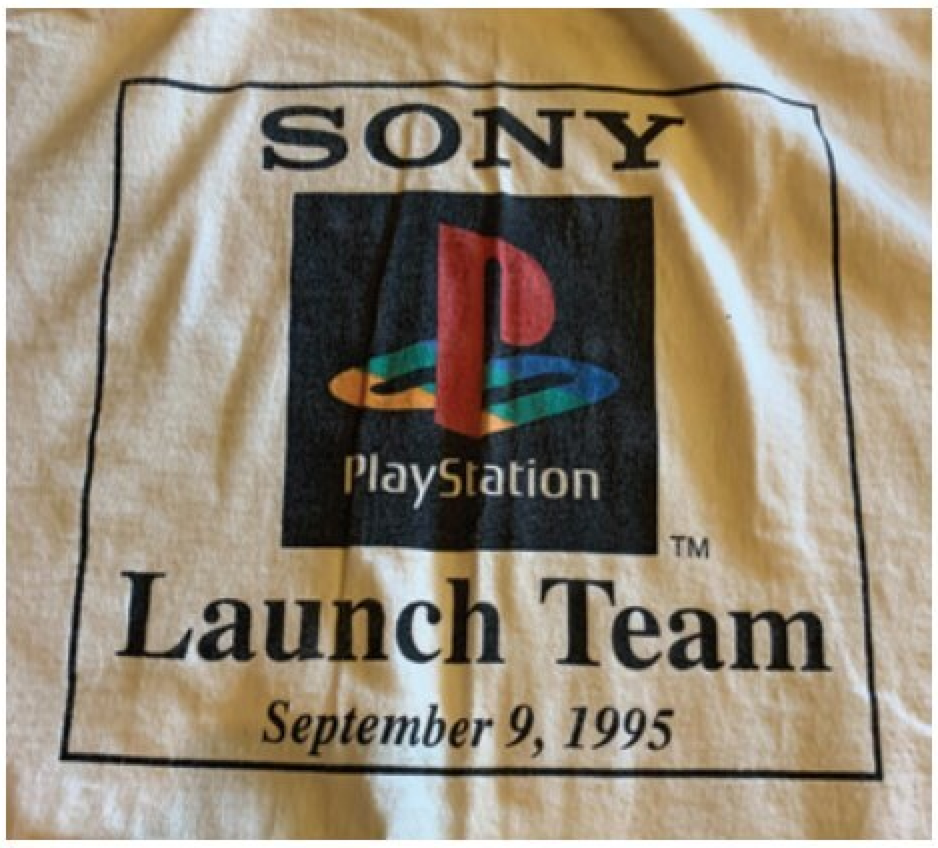
Andy McNamara never throws anything away. This includes t-shirts from the '90s. He recently auctioned off these two gems during Game Informer's Extra Life charity livestream.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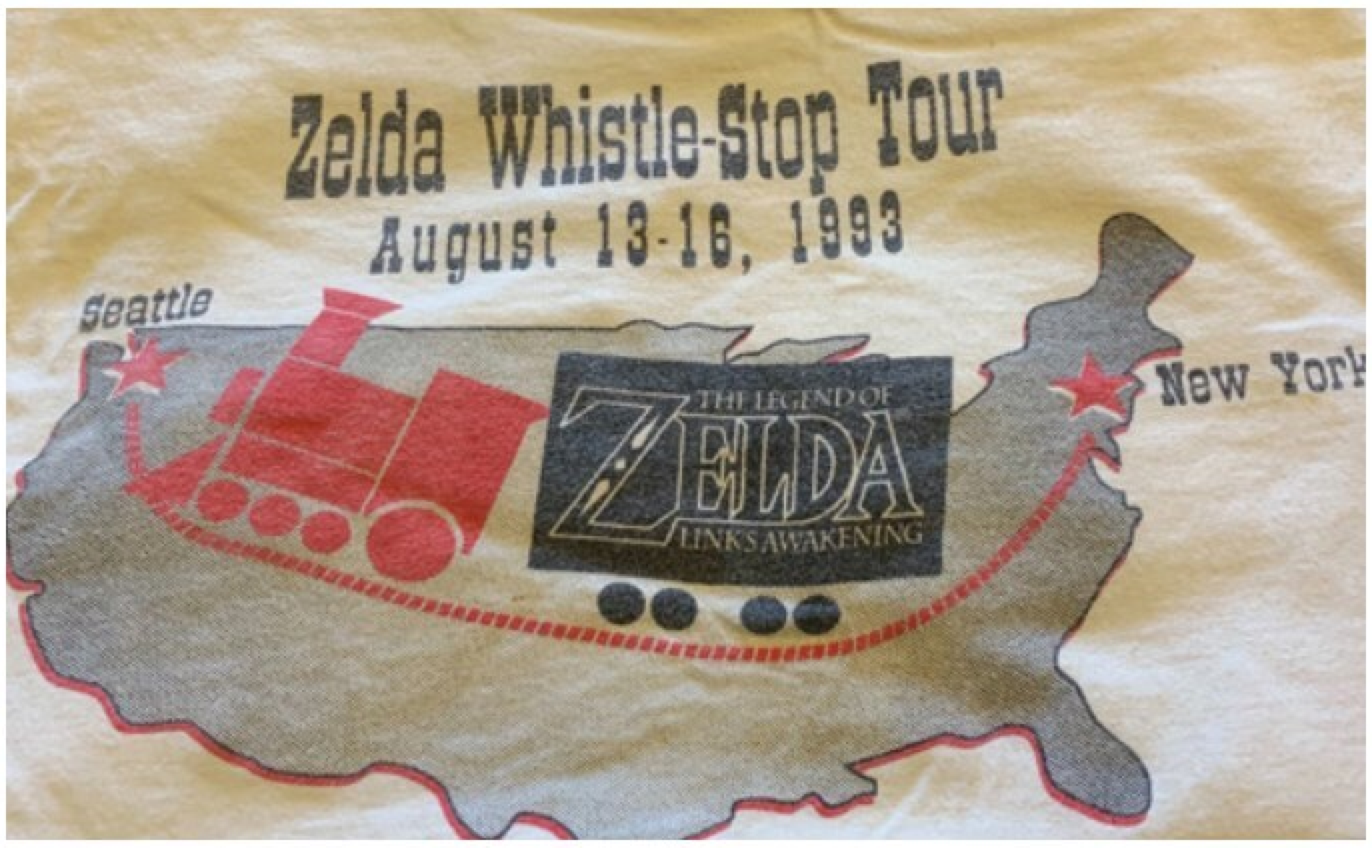
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STANDING UP

Three industry vets form Brass Lion to bring their voices to the fight

BY MATTHEW KATO

When Manveer Heir left BioWare in 2017 after working on the Mass Effect franchise as a senior gameplay designer, he was burned out. He had been making games for a dozen years, putting in the time during crunch and enduring the wrath of Gamergaters for his beliefs. Like he had done at times during his career, he contemplated walking away from making video games entirely, but he knew he wasn't done yet.

Heir took some time off in New York figuring out his next move, and reconnected with a deep-seated ambition to form his own video game company – a dream he held since he was in the 10th grade when he drew up his own business plan.

In order to craft the kinds of stories he wanted to tell and address some of the issues he experienced in the video game industry, Heir founded his own studio. Heir's experiences with the Mass Effect franchise and companies the size of Electronic Arts exposed him to systemic problems that interfered with his goal of surfacing stories of characters of color and different backgrounds created by diverse developers.

Heir reached out to Bryna Dabby Smith, an industry veteran with deep experience managing projects like Sleeping Dogs, for help with the business side of the venture, and word circulated of what Heir was putting together.

This prompted Rashad Redic, previously an environment artist at Bethesda, to get in contact with Heir. A six-hour conversation later, Heir had solidified his nucleus for Brass Lion Entertainment around the three of them and started the ball rolling on the company's first project: Corner Wolves, a game exploring the personal effects of the U.S. government's self-proclaimed War on Drugs in '90s Harlem.

Brass Lion was created to tell stories you won't get from most studios because it's not setup like most studios. Brass Lion wants to actively hire developers of color and other diverse backgrounds, consciously bucking the trend of male whiteness.

A survey of developers in 2017 by the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) reported that 71 percent of respondents identified as white or multiracial with white, 79 percent were male, and 86 percent were heterosexual. Furthermore, while 81 percent said they felt diversity in the workplace was important, only 42 percent felt diversity was actually increasing – down from 47 percent in 2016.

Change is slow because institutions are inherently structured to preserve their status quo. There may be individuals, and even whole departments, that are sympathetic to hiring developers from diverse backgrounds, but there is a barrier of in-group selection that slows down progress.

"Something that people say is, 'Well, we just hire the best people,'" Heir says. "But when you look at the research you find out that meritocracy is kind of a lie. People really hire people that look like them, and they use words like 'culture fit' or 'not a culture fit' to push out people who maybe don't fit in but have a diversity of ideas."

Hiring people with different backgrounds has a knock-on effect of better quality. Heir mentions *Harvard Business Review* articles based on research that says that mixed teams produce better results because they naturally question each other more and have less groupthink that may stifle innovation. "You start to check each other's biases," Heir explains. "You don't just nod your head and go, 'Yup, that first idea is the best one,' because everybody is coming at it from a different angle."

From these different experiences comes a different kind of game. Corner Wolves' story is about Jacinte, a young Afro-Latina living in Harlem and working at her father's bodega. One evening Jacinte returns to find him murdered in front of the store. The game is Jacinte's attempt to find out who killed him and why, but the themes layered underneath run deeper.

Harlem was particularly affected by drugs during the 1990s when the game takes place. Both community leaders and politicians called for action to clean up the drug problem, but the increasing law-and-order approaches were neither taking care of the problem nor serving the community. In the '70s, New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, who once favored rehabilitation, turned to a tough-on-crime approach. President Reagan signed into law more mandatory minimums and cemented them with the narrative of an urban crack epidemic. President Clinton increased mass incarceration of even low-level offenders with his 1994 crime bill.

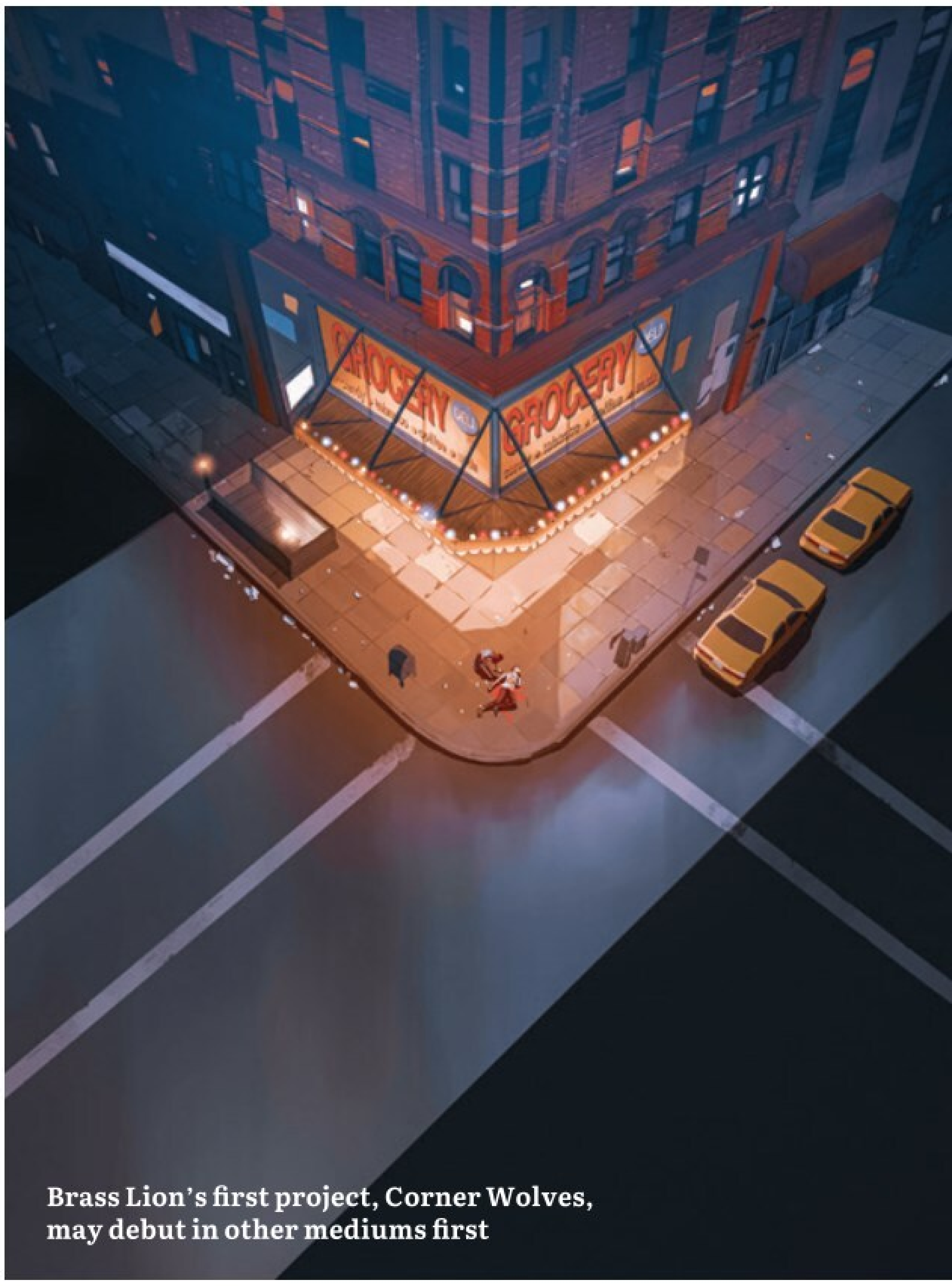
The effect this had on Harlem and the ethnic communities therein exposed the systemic racism of the U.S. justice system. Research contemporary to the game's setting as well as countless studies since have clearly shown there are racial disparities when it comes to the arrest and conviction rates, as well as sentencing lengths, of blacks as opposed to whites committing the same crimes.

> "
>
> **IF YOU THINK HOW RACISM WORKS IN THE REAL WORLD, IT'S EMBEDDED IN ALL OF OUR REAL SYSTEMS.**
>
> —
>
> Manveer Heir

One prominent example of racial disparities in relation to the War on Drugs is the infamous 100-to-1 rule established in 1986, specifying mandatory minimum sentences for specific quantities of cocaine. This said that distribution of five grams of crack resulted in a minimum five-year federal prison sentence, while it took 500 grams of powder cocaine to trigger the same minimum sentencing, even though the chemical composition and effect of either form of cocaine is appreciably the same. Blacks were specifically targeted since they were more likely to use crack than affluent whites, who used powdered cocaine.

This large-scale history lesson might not be prominent in the head of Jacinte, nor the player, but it has had a demonstrable effect on the world of Corner Wolves and the lives within it. Heir and Brass Lion believe the issues and lessons this history exposes are things that video games can dig into in their own special way.

"What I think you do is create the systems in a way that supports your thesis, that supports the themes and motifs of the game, of the story," says Heir. "And then you make sure that it is embedded in all the different systems of the game. If you think how racism works in the real world, it's embedded in all of our real systems. It's embedded in the school system already. It's embedded in the policing already. It's embedded in job applications already."



Brass Lion's first project, Corner Wolves, may debut in other mediums first

Thus, Corner Wolves's Harlem is a world players can move around and participate in, but it's also one that is already defined by forces outside of Jacinte's direct control. "I think that higher-level point of view, and that control [players] don't have – I think that's what I want people to experience," Heir says. "You don't always get to be the hero in our world because literally the rest of the world doesn't let you."

The chips may be stacked against Jacinte, but she's not powerless. The game has melee-based combat (no guns, however) and a conversation system designed to give her some agency while realistically portraying the world and situations around her. Heir says he likes exploring the grey area beyond absolutes of right and wrong – which RPGs in particular are well-suited for – and that at the end of the game players hopefully come away drawing conclusions, even if they aren't necessarily able to power themselves up to some convenient, happy ending.

Jacinte, a 20-something high school graduate who didn't go to college, isn't part of the neighborhood's drug trade. However, she's aware of it, not only due to her dad's death but because people in affected areas have to be, simply for the sake of their own survival.

Her status in the world allows her to move between different groups. One of the ways this surfaces is through code switching, or changing how you speak depending on who you're talking to in order to present yourself differently. This could easily come into play with Jacinte's background as both black and Dominican, moving between the two facets of her identity via language, as well as when speaking to the police and authority figures.

"We definitely want to get that authenticity," Heir says. "It allows us to write a lot of different characters from lots of different backgrounds so we can have lots of different lenses on the same problem, to let the player kind of choose what angle they like to approach things from or what their thought processes on how to solve these issues [are]."

The game touches on dirty police, drug dealers, corrupt politicians, and even larger forces, but needs to do so in a way that's still realistic to Jacinte and which doesn't let the narrative and gameplay elements drift too far apart.

The team is working on gameplay prototypes to build a demo for publishers (the game uses Unreal Engine 4), but they haven't nailed down all of its aspects. Given Heir's background and love of action/RPGs, the game will likely lean in that direction, but all involved know that much will likely change by the time it launches a few years from now.

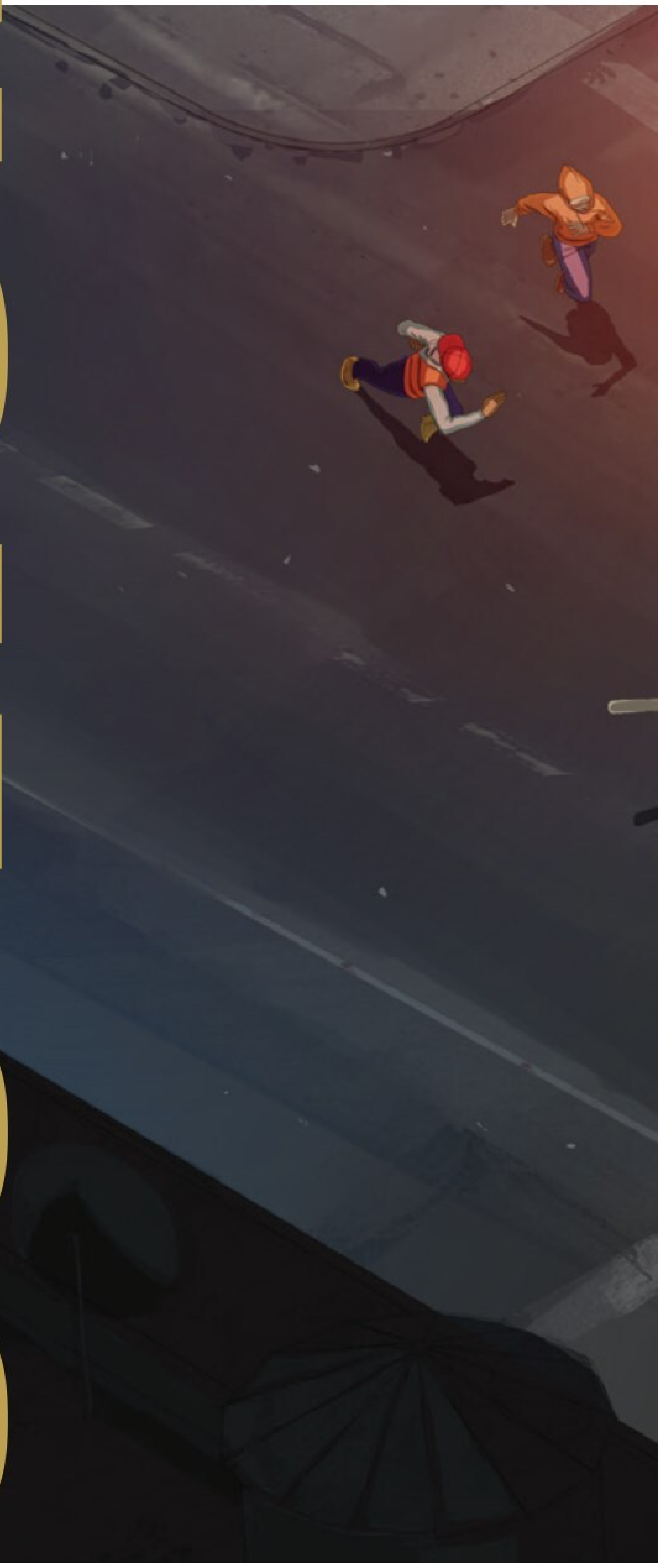
Art director and Brass Lion chief creative officer Rashad Redic is responsible for building the actual game world.

MANVEER HEIR Founder, chief visionary officer

RASHAD REDIC Founder, chief creative officer

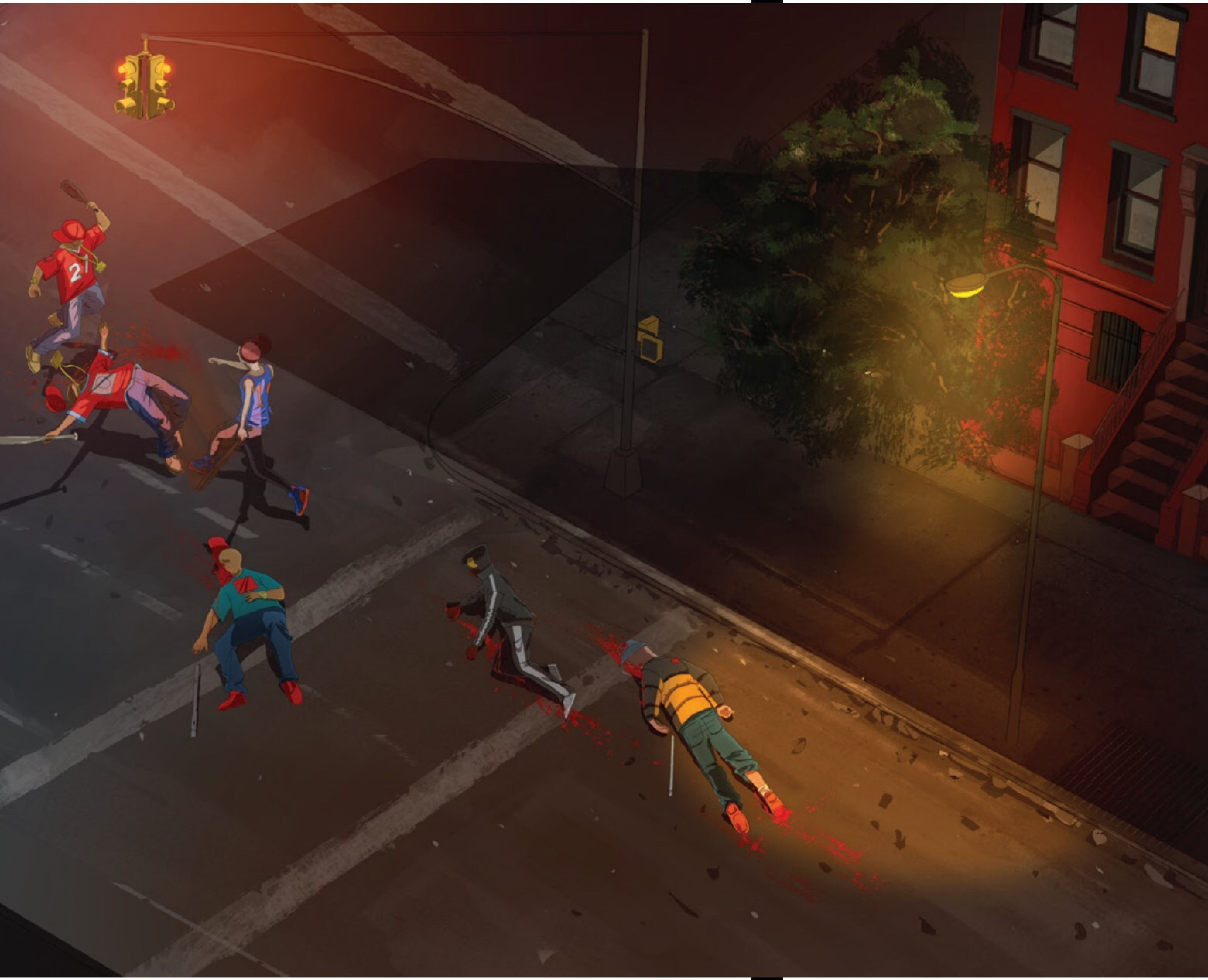
BRYNA DABBY SMITH Founder, chief executive officer

BRASS LION



The team wants to layer in touches authentic to Harlem and Jacinte's mixed background, but filtered through an anime-inspired look. Anime is not only a personal touchstone for Redic, it also has a meta resonance because it's popular in the black community.

Hip hop is another strong current for the title, and not just for nostalgia's sake, but because it adds its own larger commentary. "Part of the appeal of hip-hop in the first place," says Redic, "was you'd get that lens of what life was like in a way that felt like someone was telling you a personal story. We just have to figure out how we distill that into a game. If rap was the sort of genesis of the inner city and urban communities having a voice and giving people a window into their lives, then maybe our game is going to be the beginning of



that as an art form for us."

Brass Lion has signed a contract with Just Blaze (DJ and Jay-Z producer), although his dedicated work will come later in the project. Redic says that they're not sure if they'll use licenses for specific songs or even fashion brands, but certainly the goal is to imbue the game with an authentic vibrancy.

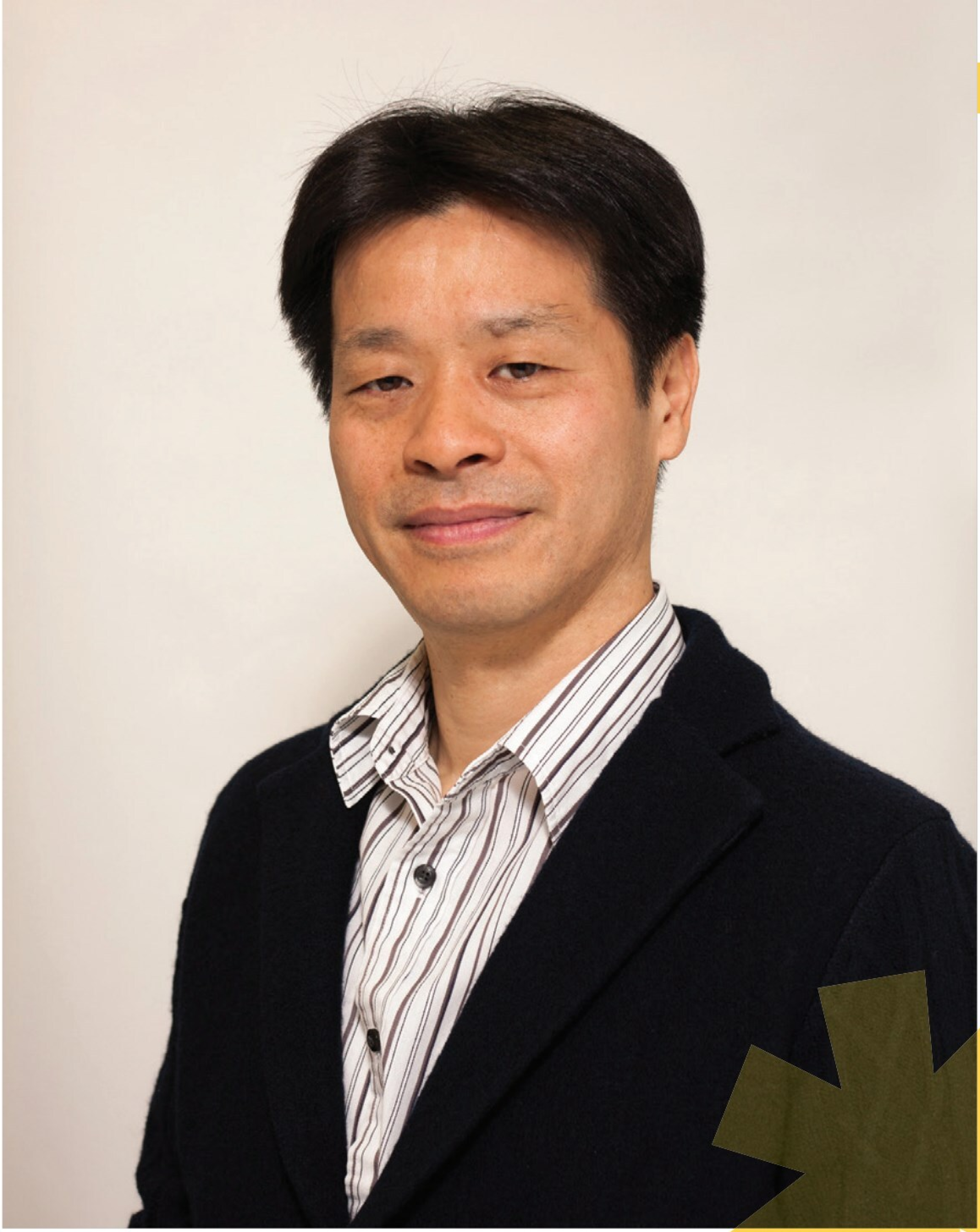
As much as there is to be still defined about Corner Wolves, much is set firmly in place, guiding the project forward. Brass Lion CEO Bryna Dabby Smith knows what it takes to build a good foundation for a game and to keep it on track, having been key to that as a project manager on Sleeping Dogs at United Front when it was with Activision. "One of the things I think they did particularly well was the story element, and they really invested heavily on the narrative design," she says. "It wasn't just the feel of the world; they were actually writing something that felt like it was actually tonally correct from a cultural perspective. That it actually had roots in something beyond just, 'Hey this is going to be a kick-ass game.'"

Brass Lion is currently working on Corner Wolves as a game, and is open to it appearing on as many platforms as are viable. The developer also believes the property has great potential to exist in other mediums, whether that's film, comic books, or another form that takes place in the world.

So far, the reception to Corner Wolves and Brass Lion in general has been positive from the people the trio have met with. "There's a major shift happening, and I think games are late to the party," Dabby Smith says. "I think movies have already started to go there, and if you're talking to anyone in the greater entertainment space, anyone with any sort of Hollywood background, they already get it because they've already seen *Get Out*, and they've seen *Black Panther*, and they've seen *Crazy Rich Asians* all do incredibly well because they're telling compelling stories. And the fact that they center characters of color and they center more marginalized voices is not holding them back because people are hungry for that and they're looking for different types of stories."

For Brass Lion and Corner Wolves in particular, these stories are not black and white; they might not have a happy ending, and are too big to solve through a video game. But they are what people need and want to hear, and the time for them to be told is now. ◆

> "THERE'S A MAJOR SHIFT HAPPENING, AND I THINK GAMES ARE LATE TO THE PARTY.
>
> —
>
> **Bryna Dabby Smith**



Living The Fantasy

As a longtime producer and director of Final Fantasy games, Yoshinori Kitase is one of the key minds behind Square Enix's flagship RPG series. We talked to Kitase about guiding the brand, keeping development ambitions in check, and remaking a classic like Final Fantasy VII.

Is it correct that the only company you've worked for in the game industry is Square Enix?
Yes. I was in an animation studio for a year before I came here, and that's it.

How did you get involved at Square?
I entered the company in 1990, which is right about when we were moving from Nintendo to Super Nintendo. Obviously, the graphics weren't anywhere near where they are today, but when I started thinking that I wanted to move from the animation world into the games world, I really wanted to go somewhere that had a very strong emphasis on storylines – which is why I was interested in joining Square.

What drew you away from film and animation toward games?
I have always liked video games; I've always played them and been

interview by Joe Juba and Kimberley Wallace

interested in them. But when I was studying, I was focused on film, which led into animation. The company I was working for at the time did mostly commercials, and video shorts, and things like that. But I really wanted to start making things that were longer-form. As a hobby, I played a lot of games. Right about then – it was just really good timing – I played Dragon Quest and Final Fantasy and realized that games were a very good medium for telling longer-form stories. I thought, "This is going to be the future."

You're the producer on the remake of Final Fantasy VII, a game that you previously worked on. How has the experience been trying to reimagine it for a new audience?
When we made the first game, we had total freedom. We could do whatever we wanted. The second time around, there were lots of fans of the first game. We had to cater to them to a certain extent, which a good thing, but also very difficult. Over the past 20 years of people who played the series have this image of – for example, Cloud – that's been building and building. And this image of what Final Fantasy VII is and who these characters are is pretty concrete. So, in making Final Fantasy VII Remake, we had to think ourselves, "Well, is it going to be okay to make a new Cloud?" Are people going to say, "Actually, no, that's not Cloud. He wouldn't do that." Or are people going to be receptive to it? It's been really interesting to try to figure that out.

How do you balance your own desire to do something that's creatively interesting, rather than retreading familiar ground?
I don't think this is just me – I think everyone here wants to make something new. It is a really wonderful thing to have a game you've worked on be so well-loved by so many people. Even when we were traveling to promote Final Fantasy XIII, we had people constantly asking, "So, when's the Final Fantasy VII remake coming out?" At this point, the graphics are pretty old. I want people to be able to see it as something new. I want people to be able to experience it through fresh eyes. So, I think that feeling of wanting people to experience it anew is part of the reason I decided to go toward a remake.

I really love films; Star Wars Episode IV was real-time for me. It's been, what, almost 50 years since Star Wars Episode IV came out? Even looking back at it now, I still find a lot of the special effects to be quite impressive – they feel quite fresh in a way. But, for people my son's age, he looks at this and says, "It looks like they just got a bunch of toys that they're playing with." I realized that even if, to me, it still looks like something cool and new – that's how it looks to someone who is used to the newest and best CG. I really think that anybody can go back and play the original Final Fantasy VII and it would still be fun, but it's going to look like that to them – and I want to be able to bring people something that looks new and fresh.

Is there still a committee at Square Enix that guides Final Fantasy as a brand?
Is it that famous!? Yeah, it does. It still exists. [Laughs] It's apparently world-famous? With some Yoda character like at the Jedi Council meetings?

Yeah, exactly! Is it like that?
[Laughs] Mr. [Shinji] Hashimoto is the brand manager, so I guess in a sense he is kind of Yoda!

What are those meetings like? Is it producers from Final Fantasy titles who get together to talk about the future – what ideas fit and don't fit for the series?
Obviously, Final Fantasy is a series that has a long and involved past. So, mostly what the committee does is make sure that the assets that make up the series' history and image are preserved. But there's really no element of these people saying, "You can't do this," or "You can't do that."

The committee really exists to make sure – for example, characters like Cloud – if there's going to be some sort of tie-in with a big company, maybe he's in a commercial, it's the committee's position to say, "Oh, he wouldn't say that," or "No, there's no way he'd wear that." Give those sorts of guidelines to protect and manage what we've already laid down.

But as far as new creations, my view of the committee is that it's not there to limit people. We want to make a very open and welcoming base for the producers and directors of any new Final Fantasy games to create whatever they want. There's not going to be anything like, "This is the kind of animal that Chocobos are, and they've always been like that, so you can't do this with them – they would never do that." It's never been like that for the people creating the new games.

Of course, everybody in the committee has different opinions. That's just my opinion. There will be people who say, "No, no, the Chocobo has never done that. Why should it start now?" But my personal attitude is, "Just because a Chocobo has never done that doesn't mean it can't. Why not show people a new side of Chocobos?"

When you're working on a game, to what extent do you feel free to make the game you want to make? How much do you need to consider other titles and competitors?
Whenever new games come out while we're in the process of developing something – for example, Spider-Man – we buy a copy of the game and we all play it in an open space to see what sort of technology, elements, and graphics they are using. There are many times when these games are trying to achieve something similar to what we are trying to achieve, so by playing them, sometimes we can find hints as to how to further something we've gotten to a roadblock on. But if we constantly look at these games and say, "We want our graphics to be better than that," or "We want this function to be better than that," if you keep doing that, things just spiral further and further, and so does the release date. It's just never-ending. For that reason, it's very important to have a core idea of what story you want to tell and what sort of thing you want your audience to experience. Of course, lots of these games have lots of very good elements do them; it's important to have your core idea so as not to be influenced. Because if you don't, it's really easy to think, "What if we added this? What if we added that?" But due to this, you will lose the central focus of your game, so it's very important to remain strong in that.

It's really rare for someone to be at one company – and to work primarily on one franchise – for as long as you have. These days, what about your job do you find the most exciting and challenging?
I've been with the Final Fantasy series since Final Fantasy V; from I to IV, it was Mr. [Akitoshi] Kawazu and Mr. [Hironobu] Sakaguchi. And someday I imagine I am going to be entrusting the Final Fantasy series to somebody else. We've already got Mr. [Naoki] Yoshida doing Final Fantasy XIV – and I'm not saying it's going to happen right away or tomorrow or anything like that. But the process of trying to create Final Fantasy as a series that will keep going and appeal to a new generation of fans – and entrusting this series to the next generation of creators – is one of the challenges I'm looking forward to in the coming years.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1990
After working at an animation studio out of college, Kitase gets his first game industry job at Square

1991
The Game Boy title Seiken Densetsu releases, which is the first game Kitase works on. It is called Final Fantasy Adventure in North America, and is the first game in the Mana series

1994
Final Fantasy VI (originally Final Fantasy III in North America) is released on SNES, which Kitase directs with Hiroyuki Ito. It is the last 16-bit entry in the series, and among the most beloved by fans

1995
Chrono Trigger launches on SNES to widespread acclaim thanks to the collaborative efforts of a star-studded development team. Kitase is one of the game's directors

1997
Kitase is the director on Final Fantasy VII, which sets a new genre standard with 3D graphics, gorgeous cinematics, and a story that captures the imaginations of gamers around the world

2001
Square releases Final Fantasy X for PS2, with Kitase as the producer on the title

2009
Kitase is the producer on Final Fantasy XIII, followed its sequels, Final Fantasy XIII-2 in 2011 and Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII in 2013

2015
After years of rumors, Final Fantasy VII Remake is announced at E3 2015. Several key staff members from the original are involved with the project, including Kitase as producer, Tetsuya Nomura as director, and Kazushige Nojima as writer. The game is scheduled to release on March 3, 2020

GAME INFORMER'S

HOLIDAY BUYERS GUIDE

2019

Store shelves are bursting with so many amazing toys, tech, and media that it's hard to know what is worth your money. Thankfully, we did all the hard work for you. Here are some of the best geeky gadgets of 2019. Whether you're buying for a loved one or yourself, you'll find plenty of great gifts in the following pages. Happy shopping!

by Matt Miller and Ben Reeves

Under $25

1

Spotlight

THEORY 11 PLAYING CARDS

Whether your goal is pulling off slick magic tricks or just impressing your buddies on poker night, you can't find a better option for classic cards than Theory 11. Great handling and paper quality are only the beginning; gold metallic foil, gorgeous art, and intricate box designs for when they're not in play all add up to make luxury sets that will absolutely up your game.

$9.95 | store.theory11.com

2

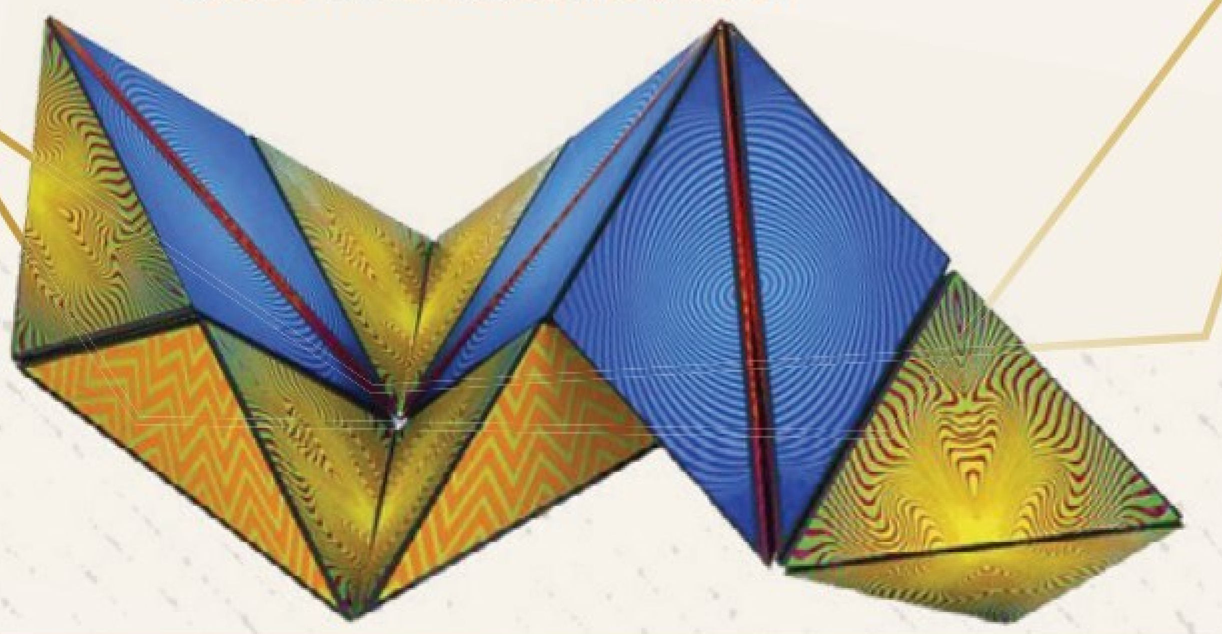
3

Spotlight

SHASHIBO FIDGET PUZZLE TOY

Part puzzle and part fidget toy, the clever shape-shifting box (shashibo, get it?) can twist, reform, and magnetize in your hands into over 70 unique shapes. Add additional cubes to create especially wild structures.

$19.99 | funinmotiontoys.com



1 **Handmade Italian Leather USB Cable Organizer/Earbud Holder** | $6.49; etsy.com/shop/tophome

2 **Star Wars: The Black Series 6-Inch Purge Stormtrooper** $19.99; gamestop.com

3 **Hyrule Crest Foil Print** $20.00; etsy.com/shop/CooperCalligraphyArt

[Full Disclousure: GameStop is the parent company of *Game Informer*]

Spotlight

UNMATCHED: BATTLE OF LEGENDS MINIATURES GAME

Restoration Games specializes in reviving beloved tabletop classics. Unmatched reignites an old Star Wars dueling game, this time with characters drawn from the breadth of mythology and history. Who would win in a battle between King Arthur and Medusa? This is the game that lets you find out.

$39.95 | restorationgames.com/unmatched

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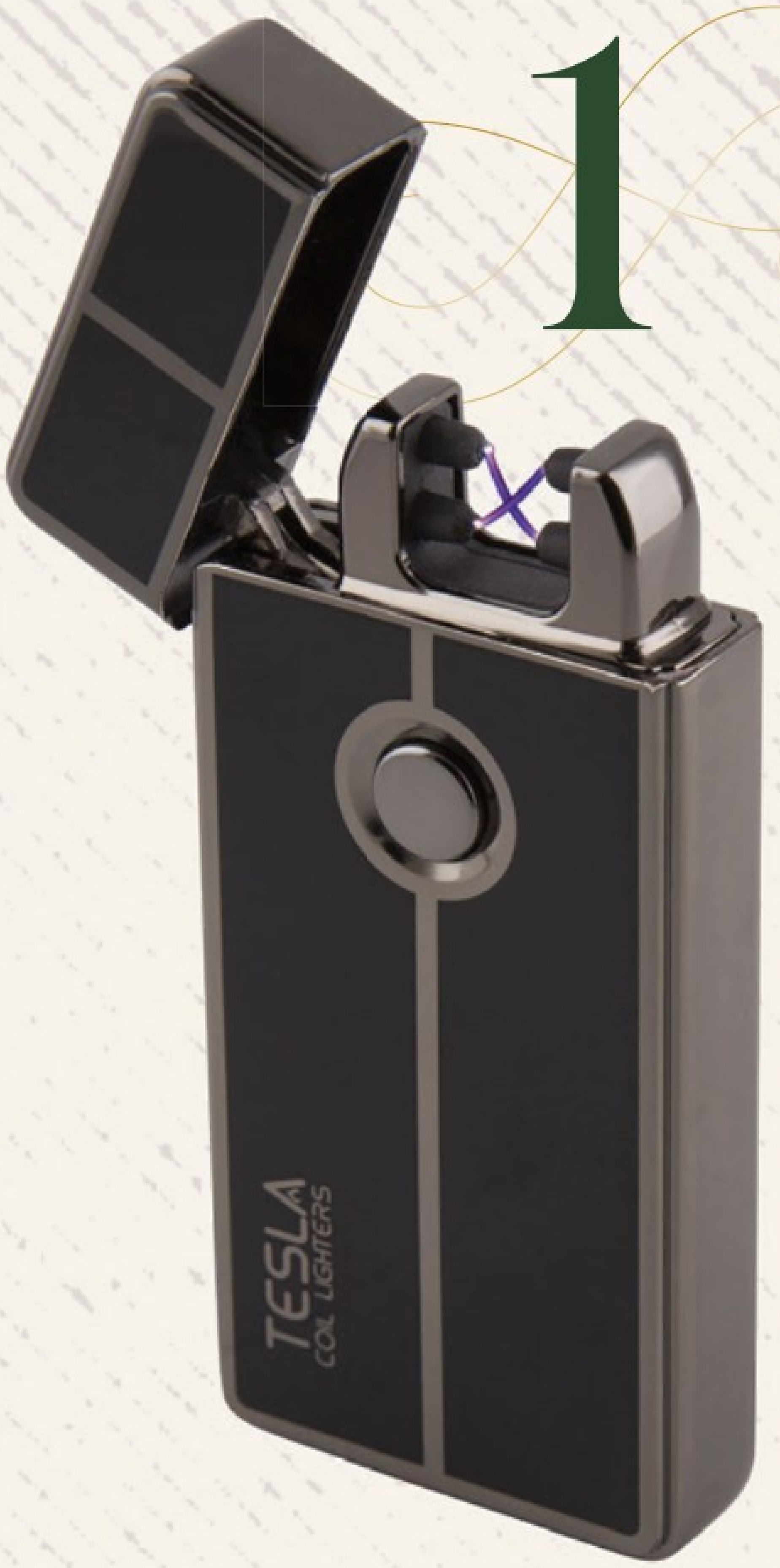
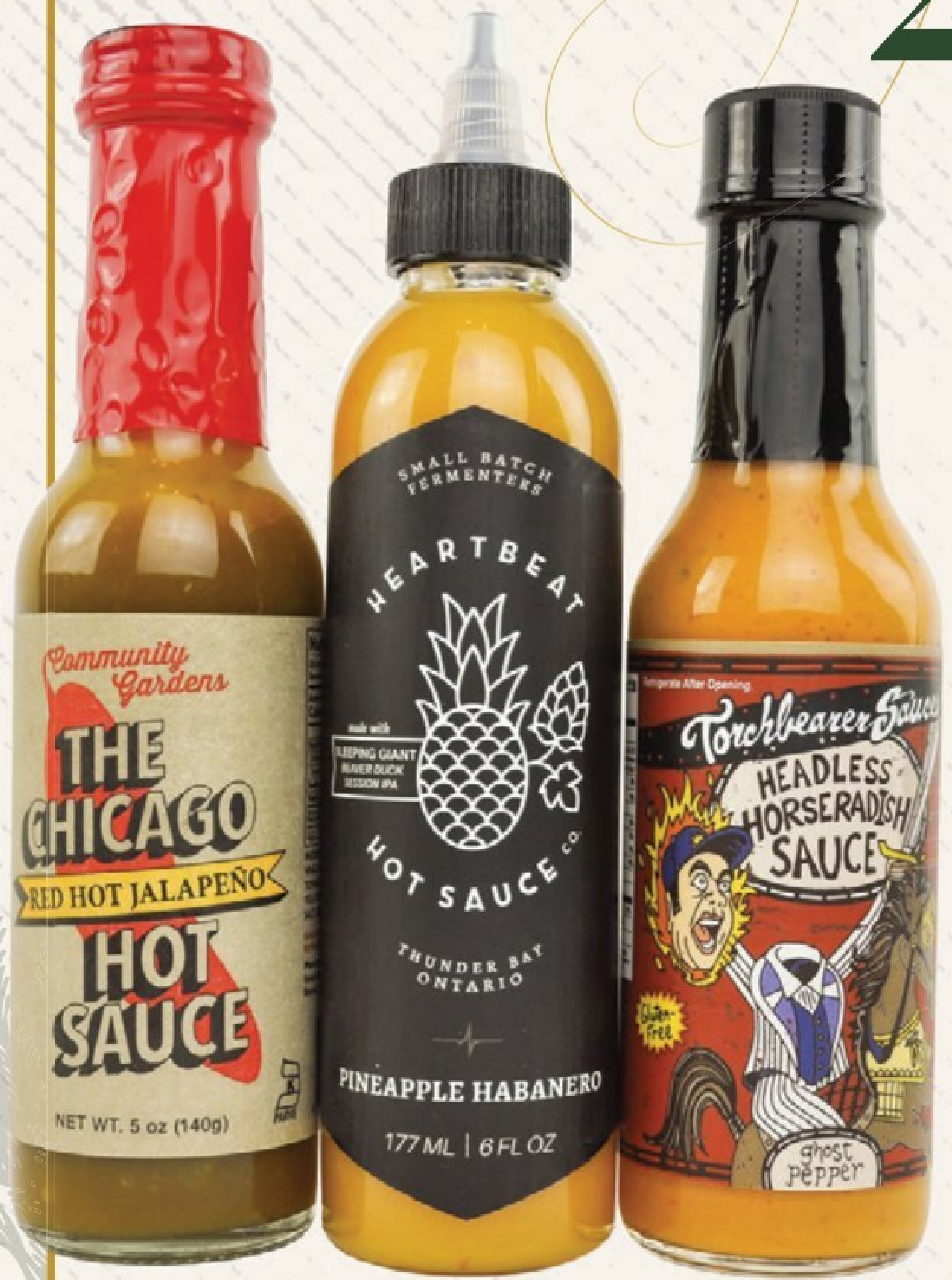
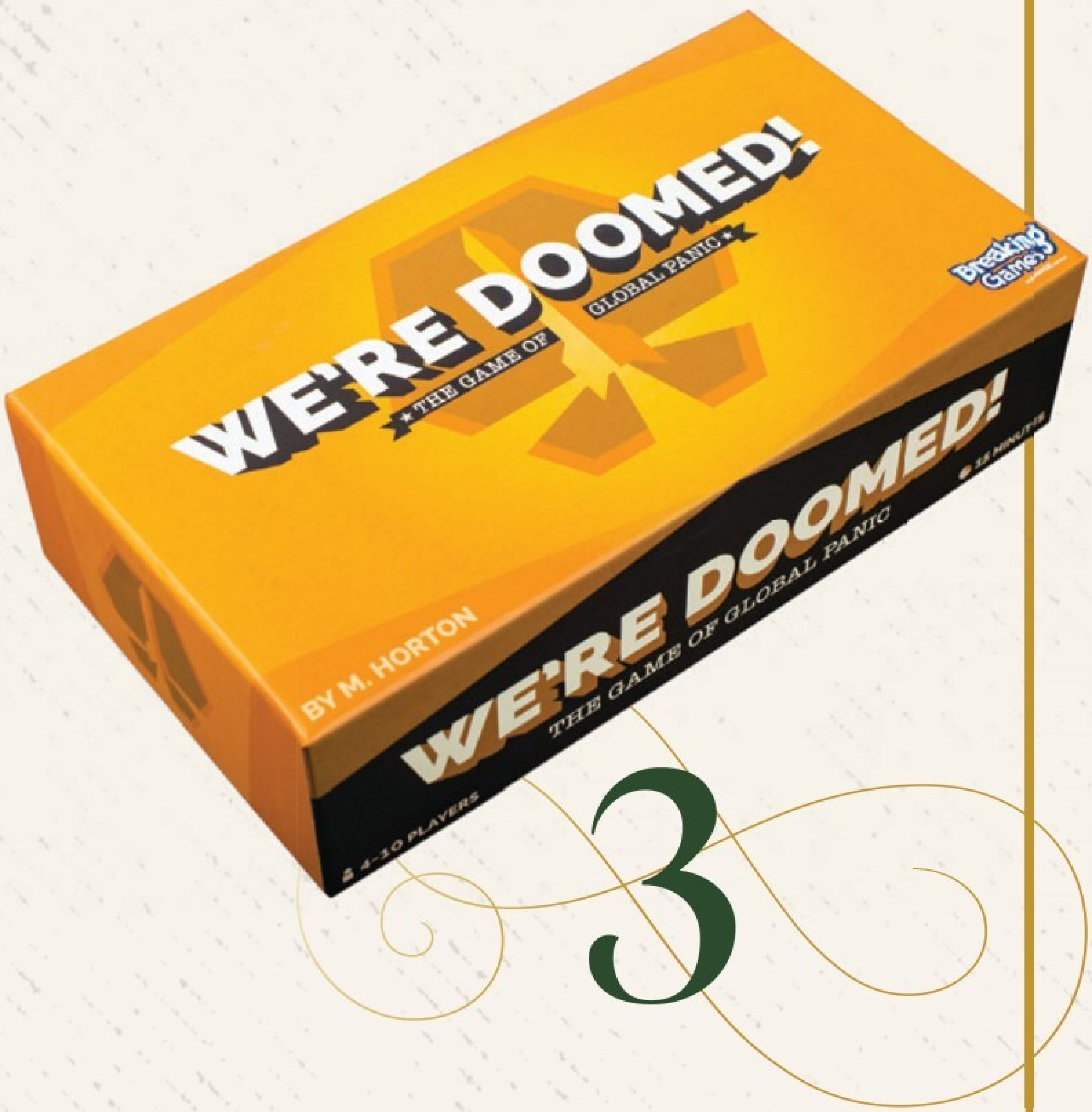

TESLA
COIL LIGHTERS

2


Community Gardens
THE CHICAGO
RED HOT JALAPEÑO
HOT SAUCE
NET WT. 5 oz (140g)
SMALL BATCH FERMENTERS
HEARTBEAT HOT SAUCE CO.
THUNDER BAY ONTARIO
PINEAPPLE HABANERO
177 ML | 6 FL OZ
Torchbearer Sauces
HEADLESS HORSERADISH SAUCE
ghost pepper


WE'RE DOOMED!
THE GAME OF GLOBAL PANIC
Breaking Games
BY M. HORTON
4-10 PLAYERS

3

$25 to $50

4

EBERRON
Rising From The Last War

Spotlight

EBERRON: RISING FROM THE LAST WAR CAMPAIGN SETTING AND ADVENTURE BOOK

One of the best campaign settings in the history of Dungeons & Dragons is making a return. Whether you play the brand-new artificer class, or you're just excited to board magically fueled airships and lightning trains, this pulp-infused world is filled with twists on the familiar fantasy archetypes. It is the perfect fit for any group ready to spice up their game night.

$49.95 | dnd.wizards.com

ARKHAM HORROR
FINAL HOUR
A Cooperative Game of Mystery and Mayhem
by Carlo A. Rossi

5

Spotlight

YOUR BEST GAME EVER GUIDE BOOK

Tabletop role-playing gaming is on the rise, but it can be daunting to broach its complexities and discover its many charms. Whether you're a beginner or veteran of many campaigns hoping to commiserate with one of the masters, Monte Cook's book offers a comprehensive guide to the role-playing hobby as told by one of its leading designers and storytellers.

$49.99 (print), $18.99 (digital) | montecookgames.com

PLAYER NOTEBOOK
YOUR BEST GAME EVER
20
BY MONTE COOK
GM NOTEBOOK

1 **Tesla Coil Lighters** | $24.99; teslacoillighters.com

2 **Hot Ones Season 10 Warmup Pack** | $30.00; heatonist.com

3 **We're Doomed! The Game of Global Panic**
$35.00; breakinggames.com

4 **Creative Beast Dinosaur Action Figures**
$39.99; creative-beast.com

5 **Arkham Horror: Final Hour** | $39.95; fantasyflightgames.com

Music

A
Astrologaster Official Soundtrack
Andrea Boccadoro
$7.99
nyamyam.bandcamp.com

B
Father of the Bride
Vampire Weekend
$12.99
vampireweekend.com

C
Good At Falling
The Japanese House
$9.49
thejapanesehouse.co.uk

D
Mint
Alice Merton
$24.99
alicemerton.com

E
Tales of America
J.S. Ondara
$11.74
jsondara.com

F
The Big Day
Chance the Rapper
$8.99
chanceraps.com

$50 to $100

1

2

3

$50 to $100

4

5

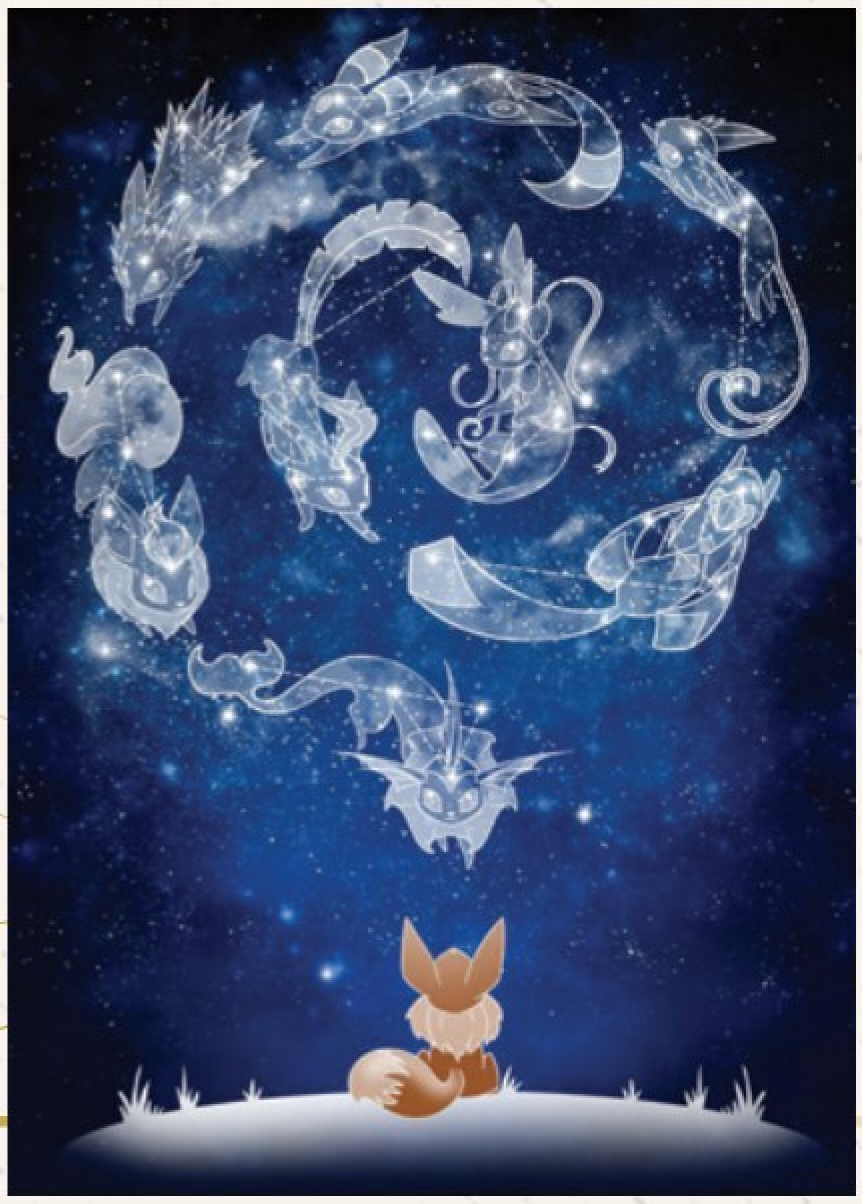
Spotlight

MARVEL LEGENDS ANT-MAN WEARABLE ELECTRONIC HELMET

Live out your Avengers fantasy with this high-end headpiece meticulously recreated from the movies. Care has been taken both inside and out to replicate the visual styling, so it looks as good as a shelf display as it does when worn. Red and blue LED light options add that extra touch. Pym particles not included.

$99.99; hasbropulse.com

6



1 **Overwatch Ultimate Pachimari Zip-Up Hoodie** | $59.99; jinx.com

2 **Bionik Power Commuter Portable Switch Charger and Case**
$69.99; bionikgaming.com

3 **Divoom Tivoo Retro Bluetooth Speaker** | $79.99; divoom.com

4 **Hot Wheels Mario Kart Circuit Track Set**
$79.99; hotwheels.mattel.com

5 **Razer Kraken Gaming Headset** | $79.99; razer.com

6 **Eevee Starry Evolutions Metal Poster** | $89.99; displate.com

you can write on me!

1

A game by
Josh Carlson, Adam Carlson, and Josh Wielgus
CLOUDSPIRE

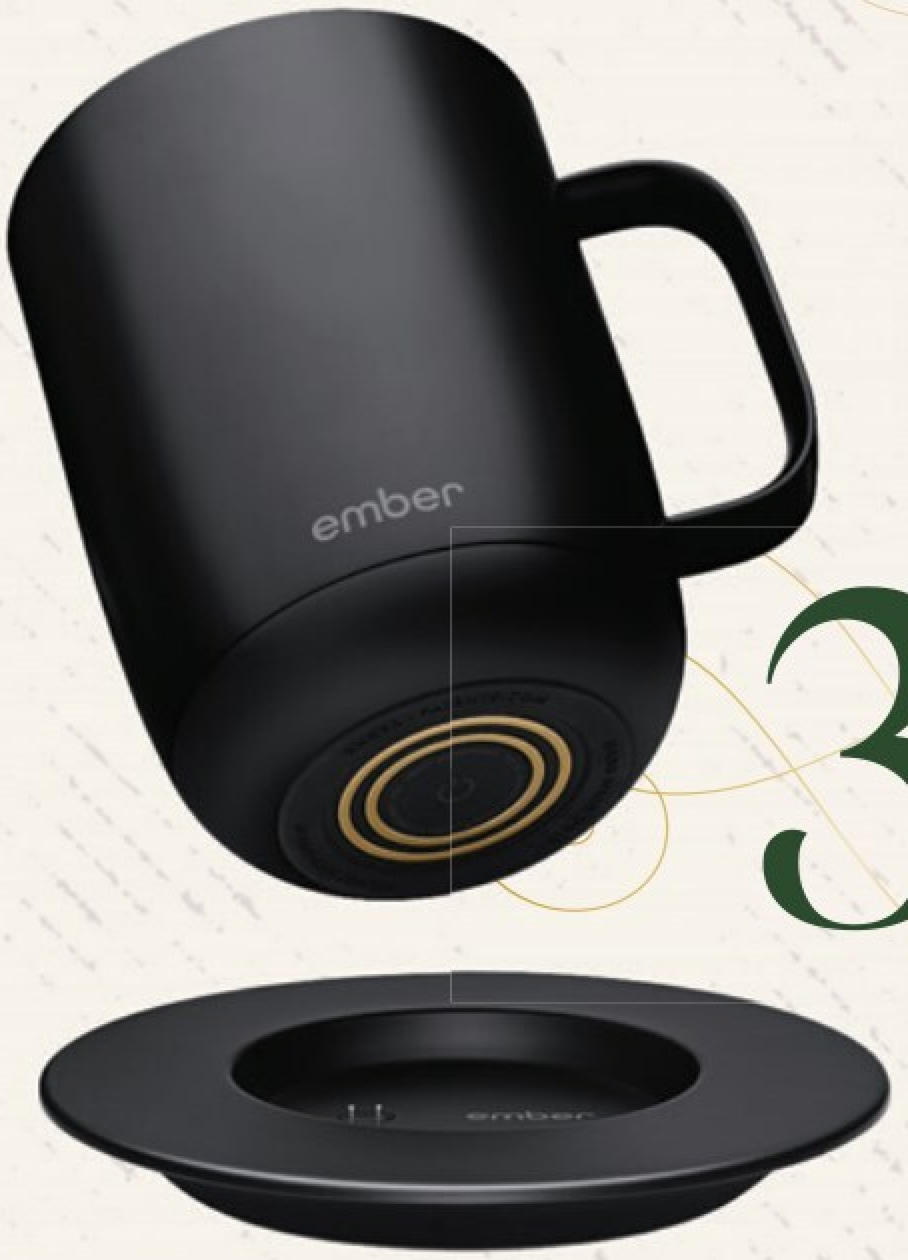
2

Spotlight

ARTOVISION CLASSIC GAMING SHADOWBOXES

These gorgeous collectible shadowboxes feature iconic scenes from a wealth of awesome video games, from Mega Man and Street Fighter to Final Fantasy VII and Cuphead. The layered presentation lends a three-dimensional quality to the image, and makes for a perfect showpiece to remind you of a favorite gaming memory.

$129 | artovision3d.com



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4

1 Custom Spellbook RPG Gaming Box | $105; elderwoodacademy.com

2 Cloudspire Board Game | $129; chiptheorygames.com

3 Ember 14 oz. Temperature Control Mug | $129; ember.com

4 Companion Cube Dice | $180; shapeways.com

5 Furbo Pet Treat + Monitor | $199; shopus.furbo.com

6 Beats Powerbeats Pro Wireless Earphones | $249; beatsbydre.com

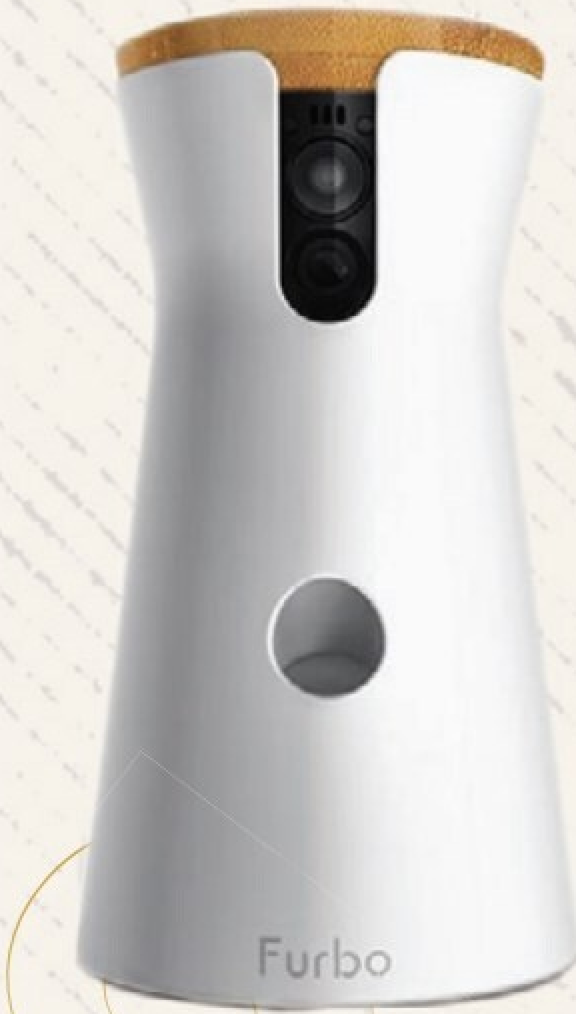
$100 to $500

Spotlight

MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE CASTLE GRAYSKULL MEGA CONSTRUX BUILDING SET

This remarkable building set offers a nostalgic trip into the past for He-Man fans, with gimmicks that recall the classic toy, including a trap door in the throne room, and a "jawbridge" activated by the iconic sword. You have the power!

$249 | megaconstrux.com



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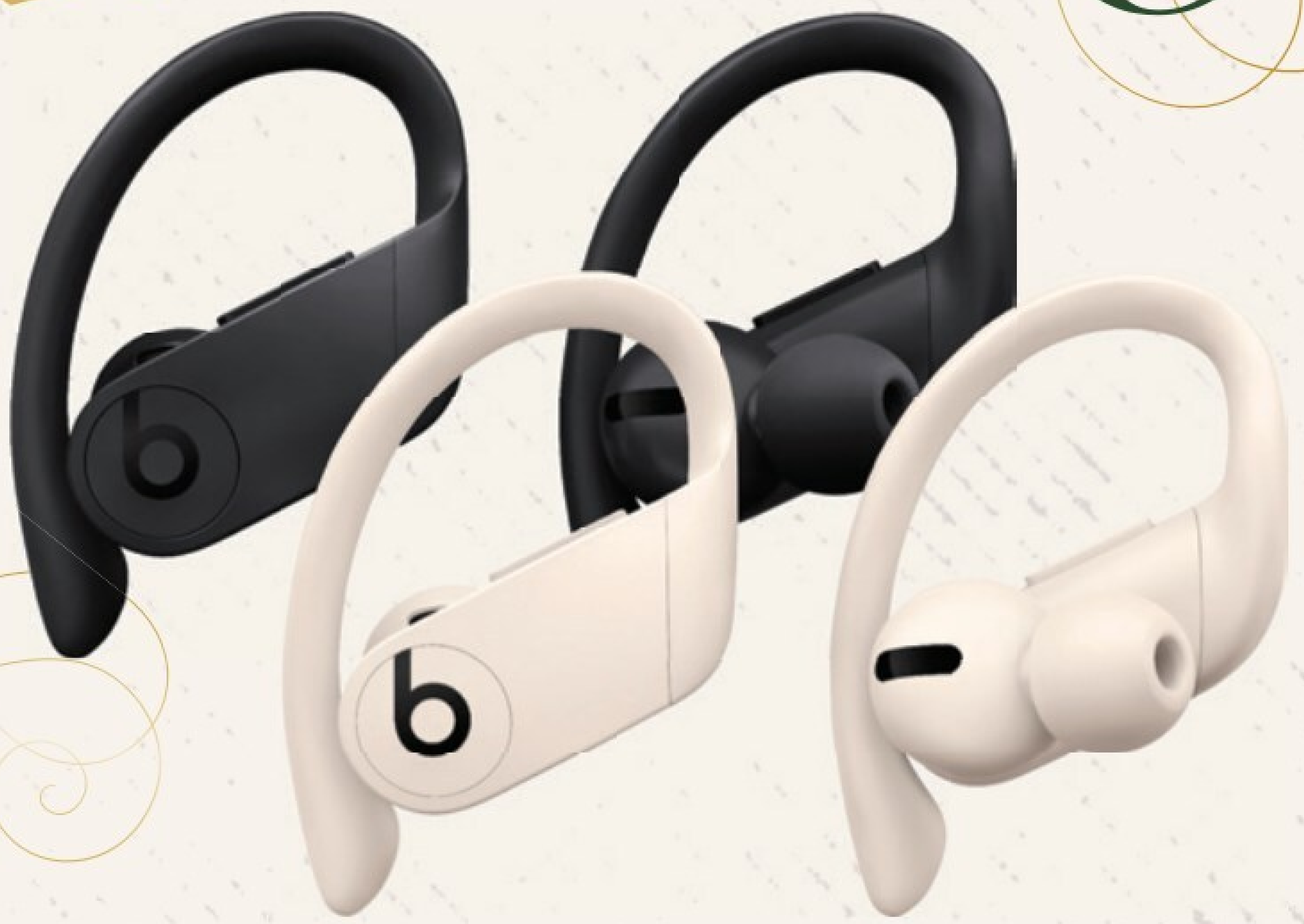

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Spotlight

TRANSFORMERS: WAR FOR CYBERTRON – OMEGA SUPREME

The perfect centerpiece to any Transformers collection, this titanic Autobotwas the envy of every kid in the neighborhood back in the '80s. The towering two-foot-tall reimagining keeps the thrill alive decades later as one of the coolest (and biggest) collectibles of the year.

$159 | hasbropulse.com

Books

A

How To: Absurd Scientific Advice for Common Real-World Problems
by Randall Munroe
$28.00
xkcd.com

B

House of X/ Powers of X Hardcover
$50.00
marvel.com

C

Overwatch Official Cookbook
$35.00
gear.blizzard.com

D

Permanent Record
by Edward Snowden
$30.00
us.macmillan.com

E

The SNES Omnibus: The Super Nintendo and Its Games, Vol. 2
$28.95
schifferbooks.com

F

The Starless Sea
by Erin Morgenstern
$28.95
erinmorgenstern.com

Film/TV

A
BATMAN BEYOND
B
booksmart
C
GOOD OMENS
D
JOHN 3 WICK
E
HOLLYWOOD
F
STAR TREK

A
Batman Beyond: The Complete Series Deluxe Limited Edition
$99.95
wbshop.com

B
Booksmart
$14.99
booksmart.movie

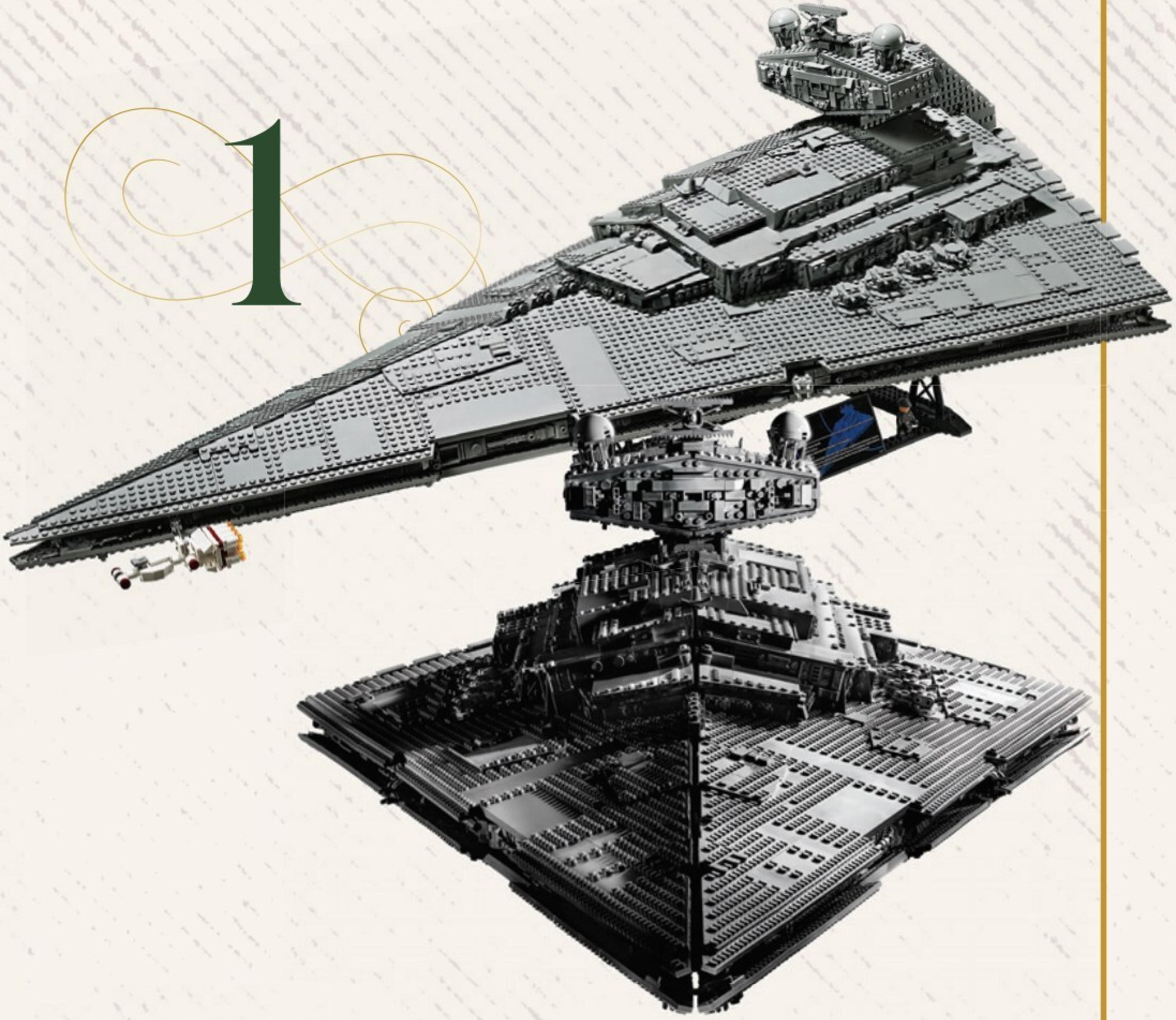
C
Good Omens Season One
$29.99
amazon.com

D
John Wick: Chapter 3 - Parabellum
$19.99
lionsgate.com/movies

E
Once Upon A Time In Hollywood
$19.99
onceuponatimemag.com

F
Star Trek Discovery Season 2
$55.98
cbs.com/shows

$500 and up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2

1 **Lego Star Wars Imperial Star Destroyer** | $699.00; lego.com

2 **Le Creuset Hand-Painted Tatooine Round Dutch Oven**
$900.00; lecreuset.com/tatooine

3 **Samsung 55-inch The Frame QLED Smart 4K UHD TV** | $1599.00; samsung.com

4 **Bose Lifestyle 600 Home Entertainment Sound System** | $2999.00; bose.com

Spotlight

DC COMICS WONDER WOMAN PREMIUM FORMAT STATUE

Everyone's favorite Amazon is ready for action in this magnificent rendition of Diana of Themyscira. Towering over her foes at 22 inches, this polystone statue boasts incredible sculpting detail and color vibrancy. Her pose evokes classical art statues, which is only appropriate given her royal lineage.

$560.00 | sideshow.com

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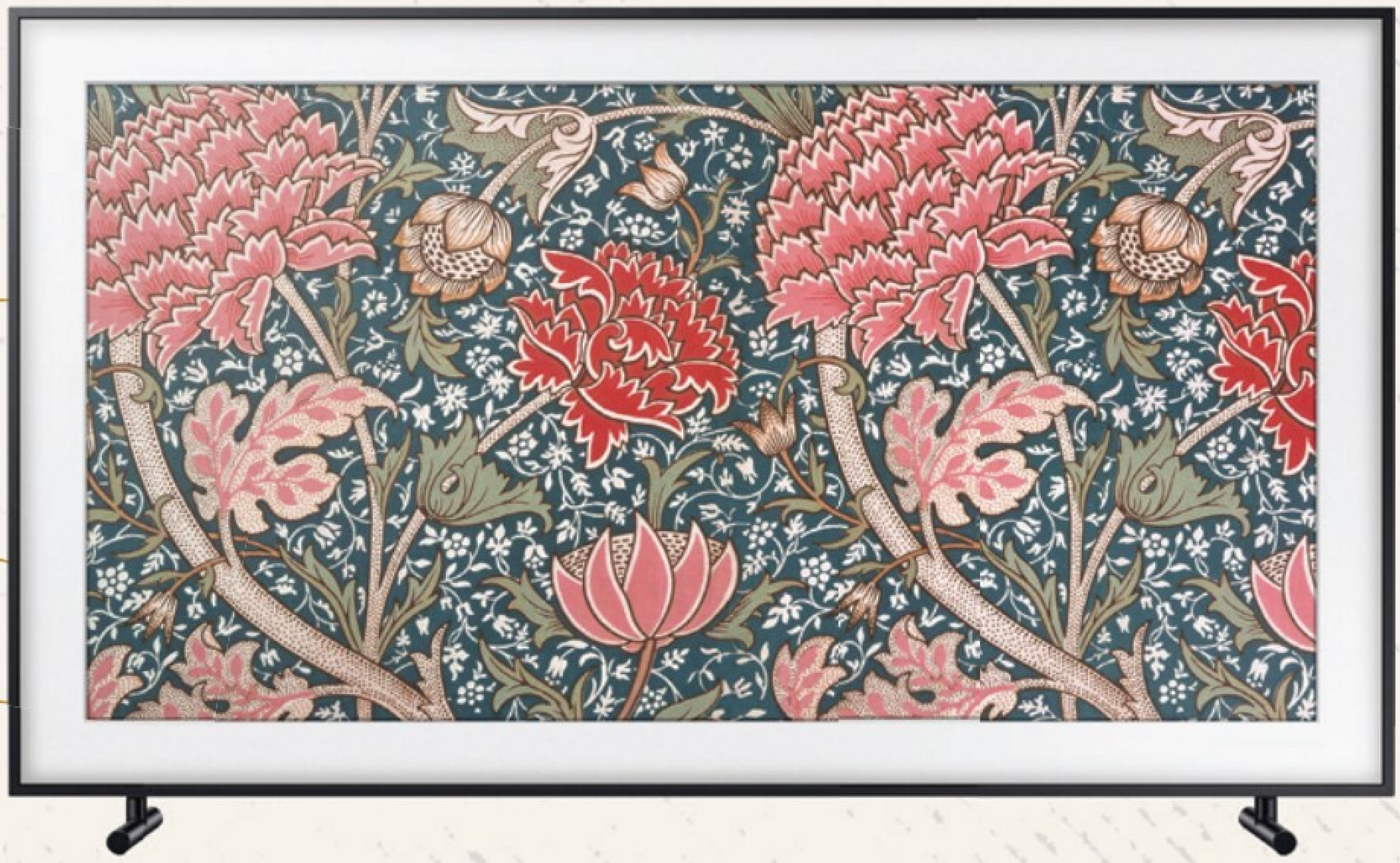

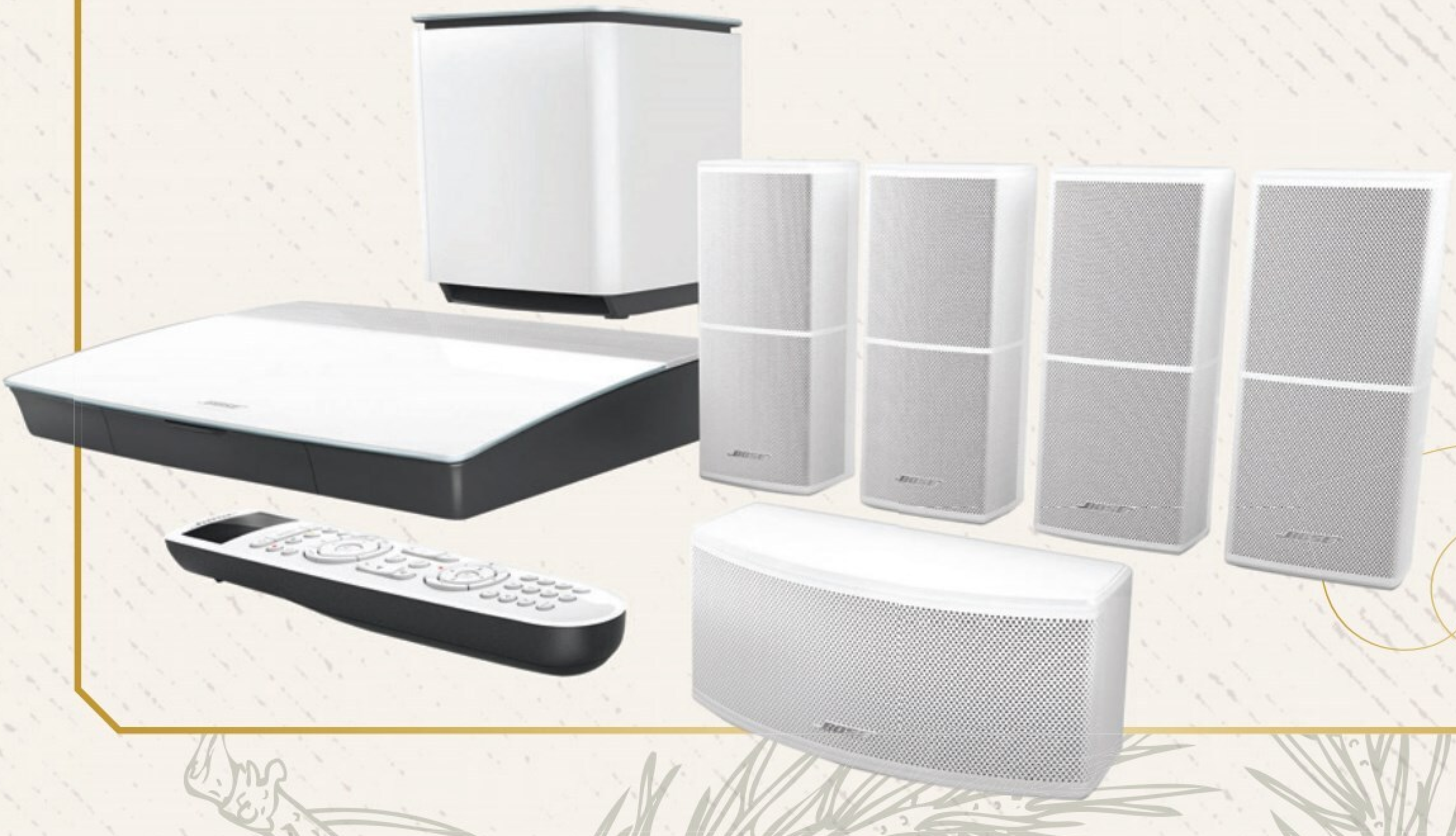

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g.b.u.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE UGLY

The Good

Sony has officially announced the name of the **PLAYSTATION 5**, with the system being released in the 2020 holiday season. The system's controller uses haptics for better feedback, and gives developers the ability to change the resistance felt on the triggers. The PlayStation 5's main menu offers more functionality than that of the PS4. For example, players will be able to see which multiplayer matches are currently available for a given game in the menu in real time.

The Bad

FALLOUT 76 has had a rough first year, with Bethesda having to respond to buggy content, moldy or non-existent collectible items, and even a redesign to include NPCs in the game. The latest controversy involves the Fallout 1st subscription service, which some fans disagree with because it's more aggressive monetization of content which arguably should be included in the title for free.

1st
1st MEMBER

captured by @TheBarrylad

A month after the launch of 2K's NBA 2K20 was marred by bugs and discontent, developer Visual Concepts comes back with WWE 2K20, which has sparked its own outcry among fans. Players have been complaining of crashes, graphics and wrestler models that are worse than previous years, physics bugs, features not working, and more. A patch is planned, but it won't be out until a full two weeks after launch.

Interestingly, this is the first WWE 2K game handled solely by Visual Concepts, and not co-developed by long-time series developer Yuke's.

The Ugly

Quotable

"We would jump for the opportunity."

Electronic Arts CEO Andrew Wilson
At the WSJ Tech Live conference Wilson addressed EA making college sports games again given the increasing likelihood of the NCAA allowing athlete compensation.

December2019

GAME RELEASES

Tuesday 03
- Neverwinter Nights: Enhanced Edition (PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- SaGa: Scarlet Grace (PS4, Switch, PC)

Thursday 05
- Star Ocean: First Departure R (PS4, Switch)

Friday 06
- Assassin's Creed: The Rebel Collection (Switch) ①

Tuesday 10
- MechWarrior 5: Mercenaries (PC)

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Tuesday 03
- One Day at Disney (Disney+)

Friday 06
- The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel (Amazon Prime)

Friday 13
- The Expanse (Amazon Prime)
- Jumanji: The Next Level (theaters)
- Marvel's Runaways (Hulu)

Friday 20
- Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker (theaters) ②

Friday 27
- Spies in Disguise (theaters)

GAMER CULTURE

Sunday 01
Marvel's Incoming ③

A murder rocks Marvel's universe and the hunt for the killer begins. Incoming is the final chapter to Marvel's 80th year, and will give readers a good idea of what to expect from all of the core books in 2020. Who is the victim and who is the assailant? We have a feeling both will be big, known names.

Thursday 12
The Game Awards

Has 2019 been a bad year for video games? While it doesn't contain juggernauts along the lines of God of War or Red Dead Redemption II, the year has been filled with fantastic games like Fire Emblem: Three Houses, Control, Kingdom Hearts III, and Mortal Kombat 11. The uncertainty over what will even be nominated should make this year's Game Awards show all the more intriguing. Geoff Keighley once again hosts, and he's promising plenty of world premieres with the awards.

BLIZZARD

THE BLIZZARD ISSUE

DIABLO IV
pg 30

OVERWATCH 2
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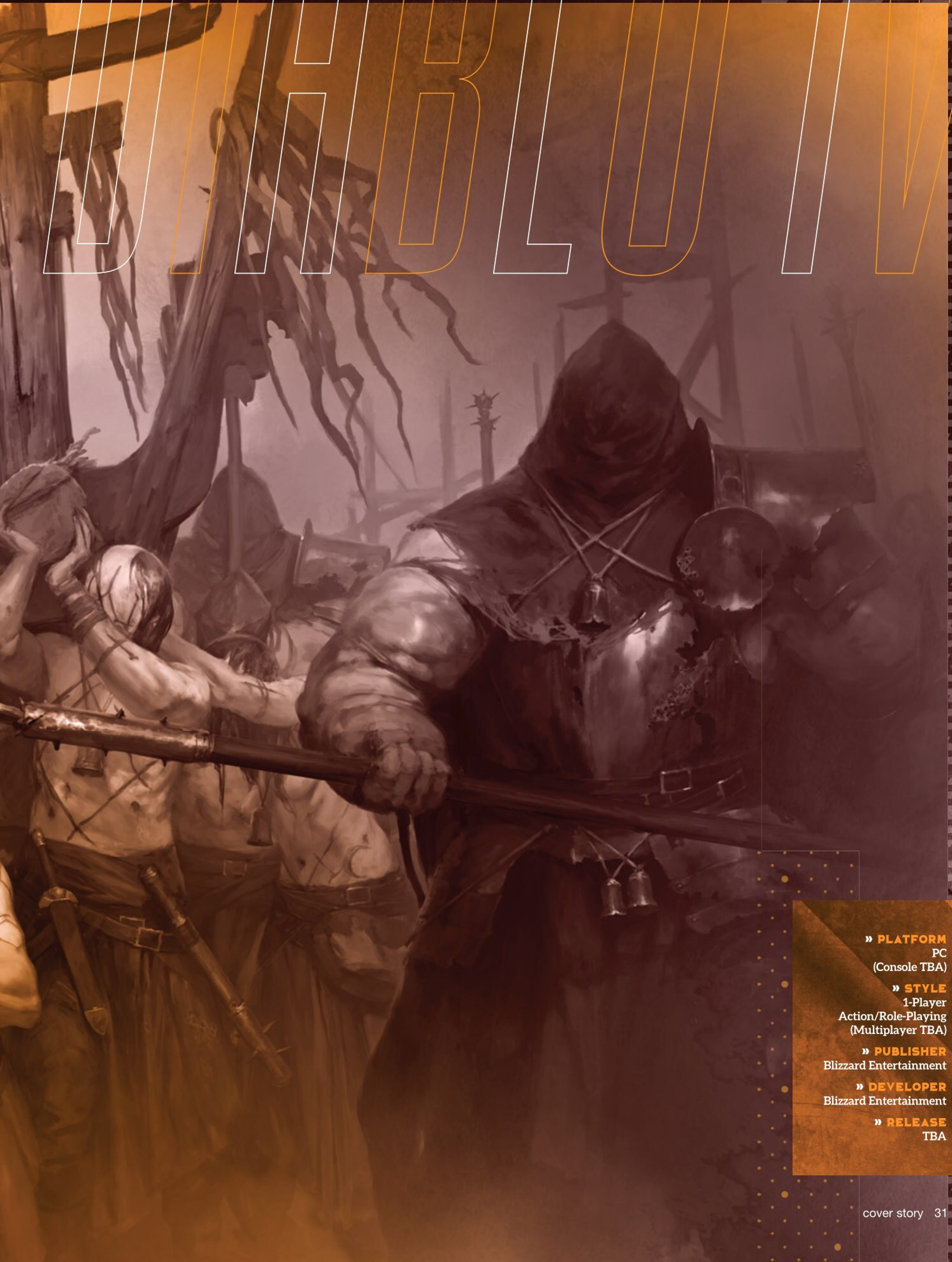
While Blizzard's roster of games is regularly bombarded with new characters, adventures, and features with each new patch, BlizzCon is the annual exclamation point for the company's biggest and boldest announcements. This year showcased an unprecedented unveiling of new titles and updates for the studio, bringing us new offerings from World of Warcraft, Overwatch, Diablo, Hearthstone, and more. We visited Blizzard Entertainment to dig deep into the stories that are shaping years of games to come.

BACK IN BLACK

DIABLO *returns in a new entry inspired by its darkest origins*

by **JEFF CORK**

DIABLO IV



» PLATFORM
PC
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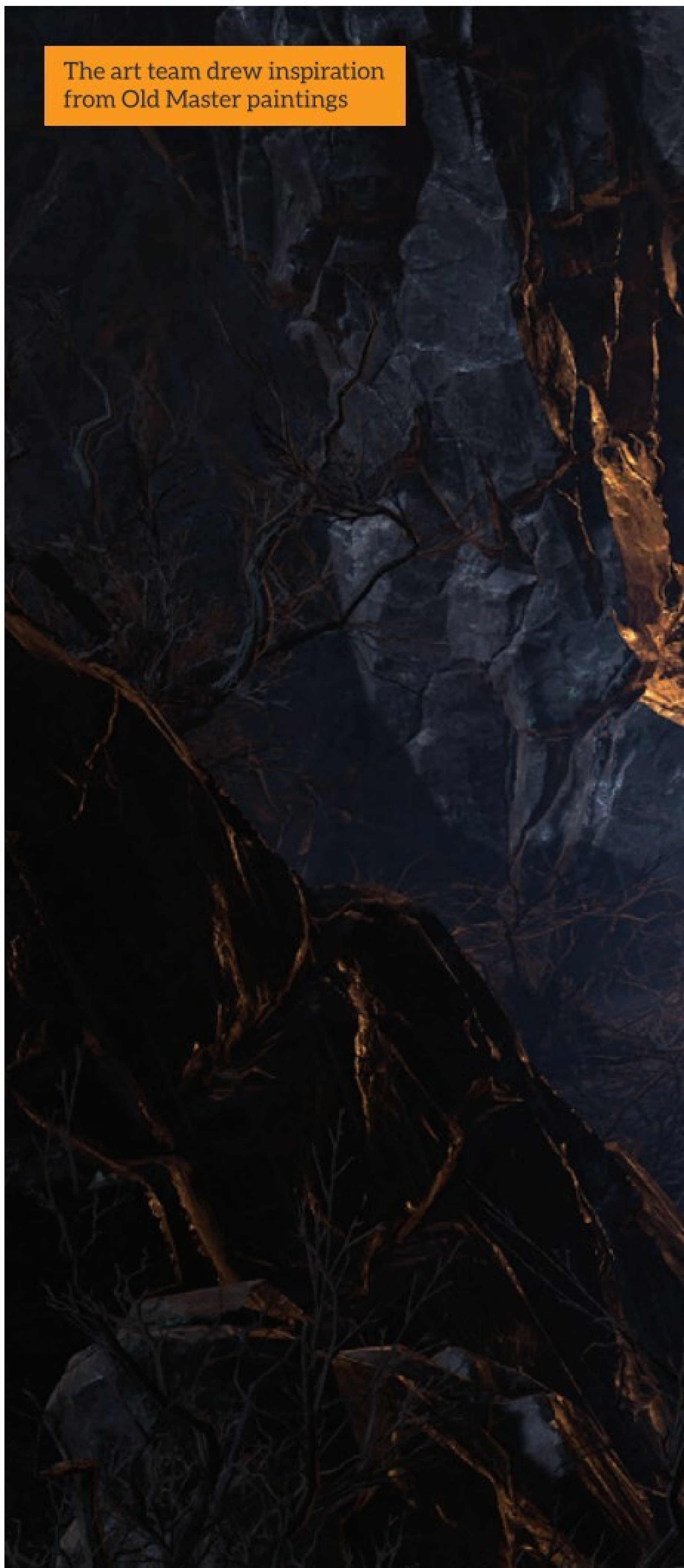
The road to Diablo IV hasn't been easy. Diablo III shocked some players when it was first shown with what they considered a bright and garish color palette. The decision to include a real-money auction house met further resistance, and the feature was eventually pulled. Last year, Blizzard revealed Diablo Immortal, a mobile game that, in spite of its own merits, wasn't the full-fledged Diablo sequel that fans had been expecting. Meanwhile, a group was quietly working on Diablo IV, a game seemingly designed to address every criticism that had been leveled their way. The art and design team was committed to a return to the series' dark roots, without disavowing advancements that Diablo III brought, like adventure mode and some of its endgame content. We visited Blizzard and saw the results of the development team's work in the best possible way: hours of hands-on time. Here's what you can expect from Diablo IV.

FROM ONE HELL TO ANOTHER

Our journey begins in a dreary place called Corbach Crypts. The mission text in the upper-right corner outlines what seems like a simple task: retrieving the old chieftain's lantern. Our party of three – or five, if you count my wolf companions – rushes forward, pummeling the reanimated skeletons that get in our path and meeting little resistance. It might be conceptually impressive that these creeps can walk around even after death, but they're no match for our group's relentless attacks. One by one the mobs collapse into piles of bones, falling apart mere moments after popping into frame like some kind of demented Whac-A-Mole. The sorceress and barbarian have rushed ahead, and my druid does his best to catch up and contribute.

I follow the trail of gold and trash loot my friends leave in their wake, eventually rushing toward a bow-wielding skeleton with regrettably terrible aim. I click my left mouse button and am surprised by what happens next. In a flash, my hero seamlessly transforms into a werewolf, swiping at the archer and dealing deadly damage while it's in the middle of reloading a crossbow. Before the archer's remains can clatter to the ground, I stalk forward toward my



The art team drew inspiration from Old Master paintings

next target, claws out. And right then and there, I am all-in on the druid.

"The rapid shapeshifting was something that, when we were making it, we were like, 'How are we going to do this?'" recalls lead animator Nick Chilano. "We had no idea how we were going to make this work. You have essentially three characters all playing at the same time, swapping between each other as fluidly and seamlessly as possible." Ultimately, he says six departments put their heads together and solved the problem, as demonstrated by how quickly these transformations occur during my hands-on time. I ask if it was a struggle to lose precious seconds of potential animation, and he laughs at my question. "No, we're Diablo animators – we let go of that a long time ago. Diablo animators are all about the game."

I catch up to the group after pummeling a few more stragglers with my werewolf form. The crypt is a fairly enclosed space, but it opens up into a larger room with a stone coffin prominently centered. Atop it is the lamp we've been tasked to recover. The sorceress picks up the artifact, and a creepy voice makes its displeasure clear. To further emphasize the point, a horde of fleshy ghouls stream in from all directions. The barbarian pops his Call of the Ancients buff, and my newly frenzied companion leaps into the fray while one of his ancestors' ghostly visage is superimposed over his body.

These ghouls are barely more dangerous than the skeletons. Try as they might, they're unable to make a dent in our defenses, thanks to our coordinated attacks and the fact that, well, they're some of the first threats we're facing off against in the demo. We're starting to get cocky, which is a feeling that won't last much longer. When the last pale body hits the stone floor, we exit a collapsing tunnel. I'm expecting a quick load and a new zone, which makes the brief cinematic of my druid crawling along the narrow channel a bit of a shock. My character is just as shocked as I am, though perhaps his reaction is due to seeing his reflection in a pool of murky water twist into the face of a decomposing corpse. I'm not used to seeing in-engine cinematics like this, and it's a cool showcase for my character, who we typically only ever see as a one- or two-inch tall figure.

A DARK, OPEN WORLD

We emerge into the daylight, or at least what passes for daylight in the northern land of Scosglen. It's raining outside, and the whole scene is only moderately more vibrant than the crypt we just left. If you're one of the players who thought Diablo III's visual design was too colorful, you're probably going to feel right at home with Diablo IV's more muted tones. It's a sharp contrast to its immediate predecessor, but it doesn't feel monochromatic or have me wanting to adjust the monitor's gamma setting.

"We talk about color a lot," says art director John Mueller. "We like color at Blizzard, in a lot of our games. I think with this one, we just have a much more controlled palette, and we were very cognizant of that throughout the early days. It's almost like when a metal band goes back to the origin, and you look at some of that stuff and you get inspired by it. It's like, what's the cool stuff here that we want to bring forward in this version of the franchise and just honor the legacy while also bringing something new?"

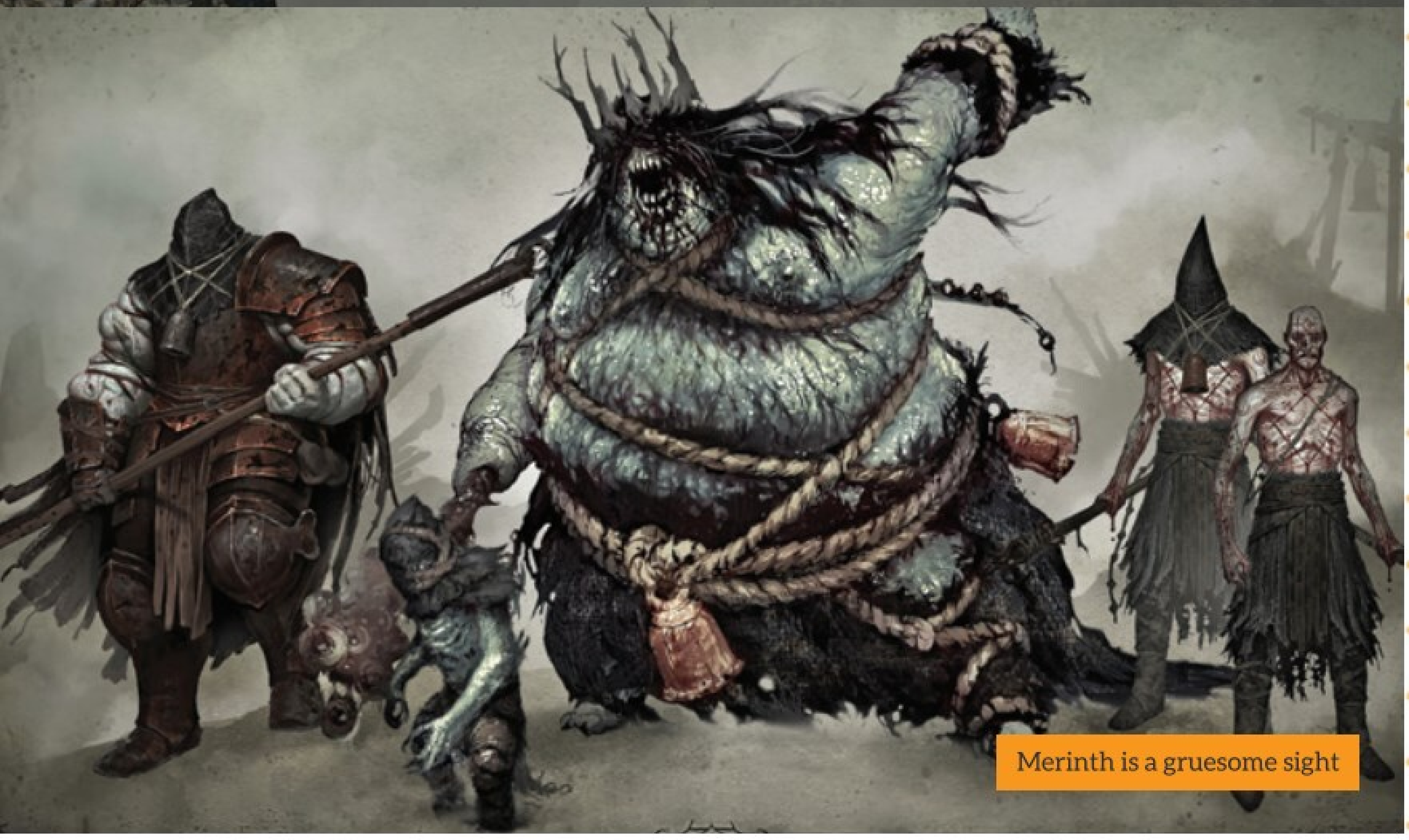
My party has once again rushed ahead, but I pause for a moment to survey the scene. I'm atop a cliff in the Loch Raeth highlands that overlooks a small village and what appears to be stone ruins of some sort. Corbach is my next destination. Since I'm new to the area, I pull up my map and am presented with one of Diablo IV's biggest innovations: the open world. Unlike previous games, which divided the world into discrete levels with fast-travel points, Blizzard is bringing a contiguous landmass to the series for the first time. I see that Corbach is a short hike away, and I put down a pin. Back in the game, a path is now superimposed over my minimap, showing the way to town.

"I was on the Reaper team at the time where we looked at the bones that we had in Diablo III, and we were like, 'These are really good bones,'" says game director Luis Barriga. "Fans want to approach the game in a different way than the game was designed, so even though it was this linear experience – act 1, act 2, act 3, act 4, normal, nightmare, hell, inferno – the fans didn't want to approach it linearly. They wanted a more open game."

Diablo III's more freeform adventure mode was Blizzard's response to that desire. "We took something that wasn't built open, and we opened it," Barriga says. "After seeing that, I think the big lesson is that the game that it wants to be is a more open game with more freedom and activities to do."

There are a few quillrats off the path, and I veer toward them. Even though experience gains are turned off for the demo, I can't resist the urge to turn these creatures into bloody smears. One of them fires a sharp quill at me, but scurries away from me when I approach with my response. The druid's werewolf form isn't his only trick. I pop my trample skill, and my character instantly assumes the form of a charging werebear. The poor quillrat doesn't stand a chance. I stay in the bear form for a few more seconds before once again transforming back to my human form. My wolves don't seem particularly phased by the transformation; apparently, this is normal.

In true Diablo style, Corbach is a bummer of a town. Most of the people are huddled over fires near their tents. The few people I see talking are bickering about rations. Nobody seems to be having a particularly great time. I head into Nora Corse's house, one of the few



Merinth is a gruesome sight

permanent structures in this settlement, and reform with my party. She apparently wanted the lantern, since her son Arrin has been having visions about the object. People in town think the young man has gone mad. Arrin says that the boy with the lantern has something to show him, but that his light is so bright that it's blinding. Maybe it's good that he's been tied up. After a little discussion, Nora says her son's visions seem tied to a place called the drowning cavern, which is a cave north of town that floods when the tides come in. Since the son is a little busy right now, my group heads out to investigate.

Before leaving city limits, we pick up a few sidequests. Una the Elder says she's too frail to visit some nearby power stones, and she wants us to reconnect with them in her stead. A fierce-looking woman named Kayla tends to her horse, saying a mob of goatmen have been terrorizing the region. It's led by one named Bur'Zog, a beast that shrugged off two arrows to the head and a dagger to the back. If we're up for a fight, he's in the tunnels west of town. It all sounds tempting, but we've got to check out the caverns first.

PLANNING FOR THE END TIMES

One of the major appeals of the Diablo franchise boils down to replayability. Diablo III struggled with its endgame offerings, but a steady drop of updates and the addition of adventure mode, seasons, and greater rifts helped give players reasons to keep returning to the game. It seems premature to ask, but we had to know: What's in store for Diablo IV's endgame? Fortunately, Blizzard was more than happy to talk about its plans.

"We've got a new item in the game called a dungeon key, which basically drops for a specific dungeon in the world, and it drops with some additional properties including a difficulty rank and a series of what we're calling dungeon affixes," says lead dungeon designer Zaven Haroutunian. "You use that key to upgrade that dungeon in the world into an endgame dungeon." For instance, one dungeon might start with players getting chased by an indestructible pillar of lightning.

"It's a totally new system that does have some parallels to greater rifts, and it's built upon, to some extent, our learnings with that system," adds Joe Shely, lead game designer for Diablo IV's dungeons and monsters. "It's a randomly generated snapshot of a specific experience that you can choose whether to undertake or not and you can bring all of your friends along to help out."

Endgame loot is getting an overhaul, too. "One of the changes that we're trying to make in Diablo IV is to move away from sets being the endgame," says lead systems designer David Kim. He sees sets as a good tool for players who are just starting out, but that they're a bit rigid for what they're trying to do with Diablo IV. "We're trying to make a change where legendary items are kind of the endgame. You have a lot more flexibility to customize your own options and playstyle options." There's also a new mythic-item category, which have the same powers as legendary items, with the important distinction that they can have four of those traits as opposed to the two that legendaries can have. "We're currently planning on them being very difficult to get, but not so difficult like the primal ancients," Kim says.

And what about seasons? "Our current plan is that soon after, maybe 'X' months after ship, we'll start our first season," Kim says. "For seasons, our main goal is to change up the play experience as much as we can. Maybe that means, on the item side, we say we have new legendary items come into the game and switch up how each season plays. Maybe, from the monster side, it means brand-new elite affixes. Maybe, from the dungeon side, it means themed dungeon affixes for that season. We don't yet know exactly what we're doing across the board, but these are kind of the discussions that we're having on the different parts of the game. But we definitely want to have seasons."

THE OTHER KIND OF LOOT

Diablo IV's move toward open-world elements and the realities of developing a game in today's market had us wondering how Blizzard was planning on monetizing the game. Will players be purchasing Horadric Caches or spending real cash on costumes? We asked game director Luis Barriga about Blizzard's plans, and here's his response in its entirety.

"It's still early days, and normally we wouldn't talk about this sort of thing this early, but I do know that our fans really want to know," Barriga says. "It's the sort of thing where – when I read the forums or when I hear fans talk about it or when we talk about it as a team – I think there's very clear consensus. I think it's really great that from the beginning there's been strong alignment in retaining a model for Diablo IV specifically – because Blizzard has a lot of games with a lot of different business models, and I think those all can work – but for Diablo IV we're going to see the base game, whether it's a box or a download for you, and we're going to sell expansions.

"The thing about a Diablo game, and this struck me when I was reading some of the original fan reactions before Reaper of Souls, where you have really passionate fans saying, 'Hey Blizzard, I love your game but you could do so much better. I only got 300 hours of gameplay.' I'm like, 'What?' Fans want more. When you see that thing in your launcher, you expect that sort of lifestyle game that's going to keep getting updates along the way.

"Our fans tell us to offer a way to support ongoing stuff, and we'll give it to you. What we feel is correct for Diablo IV is to support things like seasons with cosmetics. We definitely want to stay away from, for Diablo IV, things like player power. I think our fans are really clear. It's not something I'm interested in pursuing for this game."

A WORLD BOSS EMERGES

We head up the trail, but notice something interesting in another direction. There's small cliff covered with tree roots. A symbol on the ground nearby indicates that it's a traversal point; we walk over to it and each party member climbs up to reach a nearby plain. Again, it's a seamless world.

We see a massive swirling portal. It's surrounded by summoning stones and symbols crudely rendered on the ground in blood. The goatmen aren't thrilled by our presence, and they attack. There's a nice variety of mobs, including impalers who chuck barbed spears our way, a few that wield axes, and shaman who infect their friends with disease. When their diseased comrades fall, their corpses leave behind pools of poison that deal damage to anyone who lingers in the toxic fields. One of the elites drops a legendary amulet for the barbarian, Esadora's Overflowing Cameo. When worn, the barbarian can occasionally drop lightning traps. Later on, I find a ring that gives my druid the power to randomly summon hydras, an ability that's ordinarily reserved for the sorceress class.

The goatmen weren't just gathering for fun; quest text indicates that something called Ashava the Pestilent is coming, with a countdown clock. When it hits zero, the beast appears from within the vortex with a gasping, croaking roar. It's a huge, hunched-over titan, with fleshy tendrils on its face and sturdy-looking scaled forearms – forearms that end in long, bladelike protuberances. Ashava wastes no time acclimating to its new reality. The creature leaps around on its short legs, exhaling toxic fumes and swiping at us with its arms. The attacks are wide and devastating. Each successful hit takes more than 2/3 of our health, requiring us to drink one of our potions. Unlike Diablo III, they're a finite resource, but we started with plenty. We'll need them. Ashava is a new type of monster that Blizzard calls a world boss.

Diablo IV's world is open, and in more ways than one. It's definitely not an MMO, but players will be connected online and will see other players, depending on what's happening. That's the case with world bosses, which are particularly tough raid-like encounters that may require more than a party of four to defeat. Blizzard understands that players might not want to have too many people encroaching on their experiences, and they're trying to be sensitive to maintaining a tone. "Sometimes you'll see other players depending on where you are in the world, and that number varies based on the vibe that we're going for," says lead game

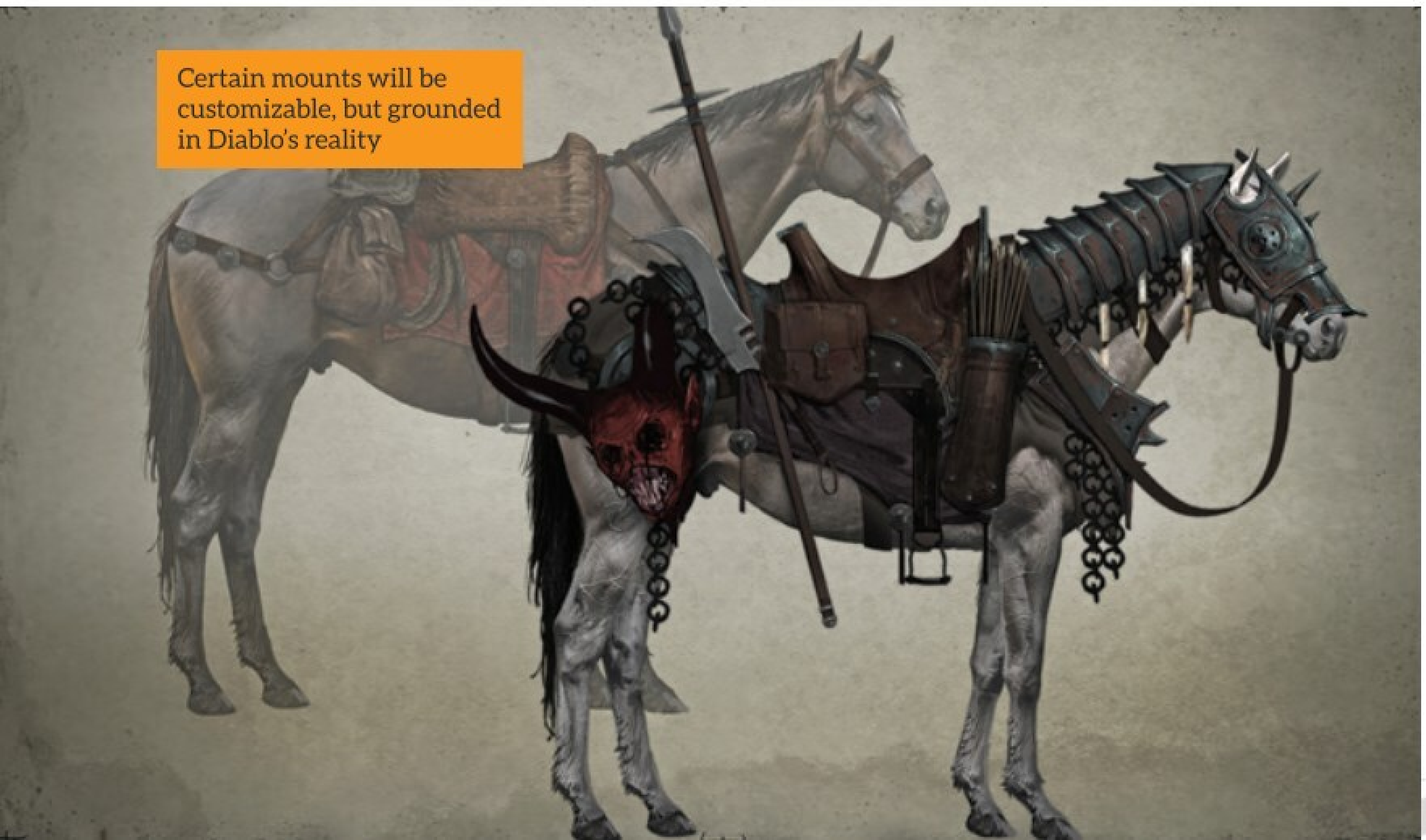
designer Jesse McCree. “We don’t want a ton of players, because then I think it feels like things are safe, and in an apocalyptic world like this you want things to feel unsafe.”

Like all bosses, Ashava has two meters that indicate damage. The health bar is fairly self-explanatory; while we’re not breaking any records with the rate we’re sapping it, the meter is steadily decreasing. The other meter, however, is building up with some of our attacks. That’s part of a new stagger system.

We eventually get the meter filled up, thanks in no small part to our sorceress’ abilities. Many of her crowd-controlling attacks would have been nearly useless in previous games, but here her powers to slow and immobilize enemies contribute, even without dealing loads of direct damage. Once Ashava is staggered, it reels forward, leaving it open for attack. More importantly, one of its claws snaps off, making its wide swipes a little less effective. Both can potentially be broken, but we’re hoping the battle doesn’t last that long.

“Each boss fight that we build uses that mechanic, which is universal to all our bosses in its own way,” says Joe Shely, lead game designer for Diablo IV’s dungeons and monsters. “When you approach a new boss for the first time, you can have that experience of thinking, ‘As a frost mage or as a couple of barbarians with a little bit of crowd control, what is this boss going to do when I build up the stagger bar, and how am I going to take advantage of that and affect the fight?’”

Our barbarian gets in close, evading the choking clouds and bashing at the beast with his two-handed hammer. After a protracted battle, Ashava falls, writhing around with the fatal blow. Its belly glows green, as though it’s unable to further contain the poison within. Ashava shakes and swells before finally exploding. Its putrid body stays on the ground while we collect the loot it left behind.



Certain mounts will be customizable, but grounded in Diablo’s reality

MONSTER PARTY

Now that the world boss is at least temporarily vanquished, it's time to get back to the task at hand. We backtrack toward the drowned cave, pausing for a quick event. At the Jagged Shoals, a giant bell is being rung by the reanimated corpse of a drowned sailor. It's a motley crew, with hordes of rotting deckhands getting in close to attack, while weaker wretches throw gobs of ocean slime from a distance. The drowned are yet another monster family, which is an important part of Diablo IV's menagerie.

Shely says families are a way the team is reframing how they think about enemies in the game. "For example, if you look at the skeleton family, it consists of your basic melee skeleton, you've got your basic melee skeleton with a shield, you can knock the shield off and it becomes a basic melee skeleton at that point. Of course, we had to bring back the awesome two-handed skeleton that drags his ax behind him – that's one of our favorites from the third game." He says they looked back at Diablo II's skeleton archers, which would fire away at players from offscreen and present a risk/reward decision: Do you disengage from your current fight to find out who's shooting at you, which could pull even more enemies into battle? Or do you ignore the shots, taking damage?

"When we were sitting down to build the skeletons in Diablo IV, we came up with this idea of the skeleton ballista," Shely continues. "It's an amalgamation of skeletons that are wielding this giant half-bow, half-ballista thing, and they fire these sort of pikes or giant spears at the player. We want to recreate this gameplay of, 'Something's happening over here, should I go and fight it?'"

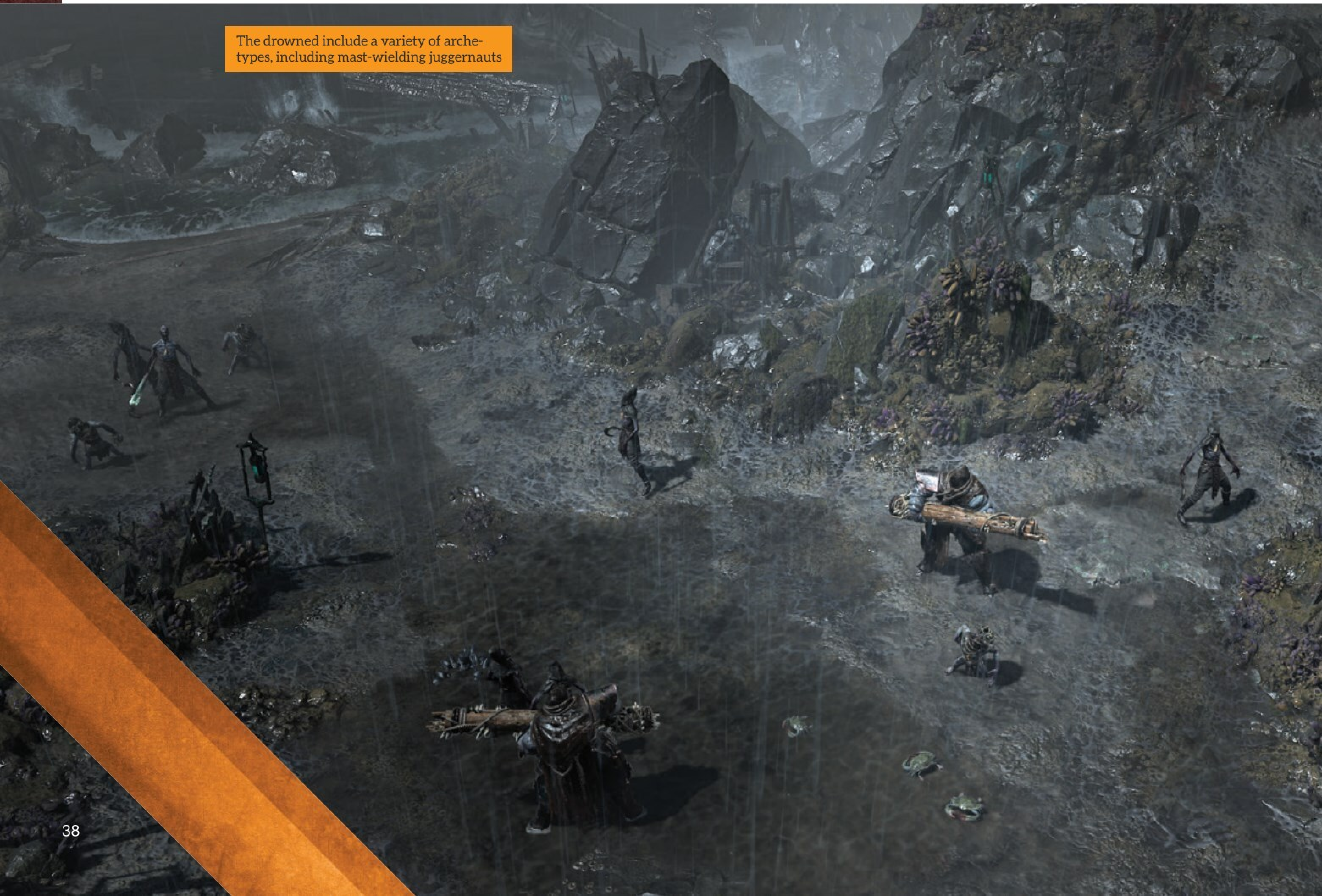
I get in close to the bell and batter it as best I can. It clangs loudly as I bash it, drawing in more elite enemies. One of them, Ripscar the Revenant is a large creature who has a frost effect. While I swap between werebear and werewolf forms, he drops nodes of ice that, when shattered, create an AoE pulse that freezes any heroes foolish enough not to move. Fortunately, I have evade, a move that lets me quickly dodge out of harm's way. Unlike Diablo III's roll maneuver, which was introduced with the console version, this is more of a quick feint. It might not be as fun to use during traversal, but it's more grounded in reality – and just as effective in avoiding damage.

Once we clear the event (which includes a run-in with a drowned juggernaut who uses part of a mast like a club), we head toward the entrance of the drowned cavern. It's a large cave opening, covered with barnacles and decorated with the remnants of broken ships. This marks the transition between the shared open world and an instanced, party-only experience.

Moving inside, we see the lantern-wielding apparition of a young man, Malcolm Corse, followed by his father, chieftan Edan Corse. Edan tells his son that they're in the lair of a creature that can feed the village for months. The son asks if they'll be able to face such a monster, and Edan says they will see. Before we can ponder the sinister undertones too much, we're attacked by more drowned.

BUILDING UP – AND MOUNTING UP

Now that I've spent more time with the druid, I'm better equipped to make use of his arsenal of abilities. One of my go-to maneuvers has him pull a boulder from the ground using his mind, and then roll the stony sphere toward his targets. The boulder then smashes into enemies, doing damage with every hit. It's particularly effective in tight spaces like these caverns, where it's able to smash multiple drowned simultaneously, knocking them backward and sense-



The drowned include a variety of archetypes, including mast-wielding juggernauts less. I find interesting ways to combine moves, too. For instance, I find that using the werebear rush to get through a cluster of enemies is an effective way to set up a boulder, hitting their exposed backs before they have time to react.

I'm not able to tweak my build, but looking at the menus I can see both a skill tree and talent tree. What gives? "For the skill-point system, what we chose was you unlock skill points as you level up and you spend those skill points to unlock skills or to rank them up," says lead system designer David Kim. Instead of a one-and-done selection like Diablo III, players can put more points into increasing the potency of any given skill as they level up. "Every skill goes up to rank 15, and you start unlocking skill points from level two and you get one or more depending on the level. Diablo III was more about I unlock everything as I level up and then visually or gameplay wise I choose my rune options; Here, every time I level up I have something to think about: Which skill am I going to put a point into and then which one am I going to rank up to use?"

Players can't reset their skill trees, but they will be able to max them out, even though only a set number of those skills can be assigned to the hotbar at any given time. The talent tree, in contrast, offers passive buffs and bonuses, and it can be reset at will.

Moving on, I find a piece of chest armor that has two empty sockets. As luck would have it, a pair of runes drop along with the item. Unlike Diablo III's runes, which were essentially ways to modify skills, these runes are a throwback to the way they were handled in Diablo II – with some tweaking.

"We took inspiration from the Diablo II runes, but what we really wanted was to get that feeling of 'I am making my own power choice that suits me the best out of all these combinations,'" Kim says. There are two types of runes in Diablo IV, condition runes and effect runes. Condition runes might trigger when the player does something like dealing a specific amount of damage or opening a chest. The effects can be things like increasing the critical-strike chance. The runes I get in the demo give me a critical-strike buff every time I drink a potion. Unlike Diablo II's system, the runes in Diablo IV don't require trial-end-error experimentation. "Because the times have changed a little bit, we wanted to keep the customization part and enhance it while reducing the requirement to having to look it up if I'm just playing normally," Kim says.

The ghostly figures appear one last time on the rim of a flooded pool. Malcom points out the way forward is blocked, and his father makes a grim choice: He pushes his son in the water as a sacrifice to whatever lurks below, saying that the village will now have full nets – for now. Back in our timeline, the water drains, allowing my party to jump down to the second floor. Unlike previous games, there's no load when travelling between sections of a dungeon. Just like the overworld, dungeons are one continuous space, though they're randomly generated as opposed to the hand-crafted mainland.

At the end of this newly drained tunnel, we see what exactly Edan was bowing to: a horrifying creature called Merinth. She's a rotten behemoth, wearing a tattered skirt that looks as though it was fashioned from a sail. It's cinched around her round belly with a rope, upon which the bells from a variety of wrecked ships hang. Her hair is covered with seaweed. If the mere sight of her wasn't enough to make us flinch, her attacks seal the deal. Jets of stagnant water erupt from her mouth, dealing a fair bit of damage. After facing Ashava, however, she's not especially tough. My party unleashes its most powerful attacks, and Merinth quickly falls to an onslaught of meteors, lightning, and hits from a flaming hammer. She pops like a boil, her waterlogged body draining onto the clay floor.

WHO IS LILITH?

Diablo IV's cinematic reveal shows a group of adventurers unwittingly unlocking a sealed door using blood magic. While the identity of the duplicitous priest behind the ritual isn't known quite yet, Diablo fans should immediately recognize who he's brought back into the world: Lilith, the daughter of Mephisto and creator of the world of Sanctuary.

If you're not quite up on your Diablo lore, the significance of her reappearance might be lost on you. Essentially, it's a big deal. She's a demon who, tired of the endless clash between angels and demons, forged an alliance with her former prisoner, the angel Inarius. The pair stole the Worldstone and created Sanctuary, and their coupling created the Nephalem – hybrid creatures that would eventually become drained of their power and known as human.

Lilith was eventually banished to the Void, where she has remained – at least until now.

We only saw three characters in the demo, but Blizzard says Diablo IV will ship with five

"We are Blizzard's M-rated title, and we want to embrace that, and we want to go wherever we can go," Chilano says. "Killing a monster should be rewarding in itself. When you kill a boss, it should be pretty awesome, and it should tell a little bit of a story, too. When we kill that drowned queen, she's filled with water and waterclogged intestines and oozing old mildewy water comes out – it's gross."

We portal back to town, since it's the fastest way back. Walking back would be a bit of a slog, but players don't have to hoof it in Diablo IV's open world. For the first time in the series, players can access mounts.

"We looked at all of our favorite open-world games and they all have a mount or a mount equivalent," Barriga says. "We were thinking how would mounts work in Diablo. One of the mantras that John has is it has to be gothic, medieval, and dark, and you can't get much more medieval than a horse. To me, it's such a slam dunk." Players can customize their mounts, but don't expect to get too silly. "How do you make a Diablo mount? You do it by not having unicorns and pegasi and dragons," Barriga says.

We share the events with Nora, and she seems equally disturbed. Her son takes the news far worse, writhing around on the bed before going completely limp. While we'd love to continue helping the family sort out this reckoning with the past, we've got more adventuring to do.

THE TOUGH ROAD AHEAD

We head east toward Garan Hold. It's the ruined fort I saw right after emerging from the crypt, and it's been overrun by Fallen. These red imp-like creeps are a Diablo mainstay, and one particularly interesting aspect of them is back from Diablo II. Fallen shaman resurrect their dead comrades if you don't act quickly, adding an interesting layer of strategy to what could otherwise be a fairly mindless slaughter.

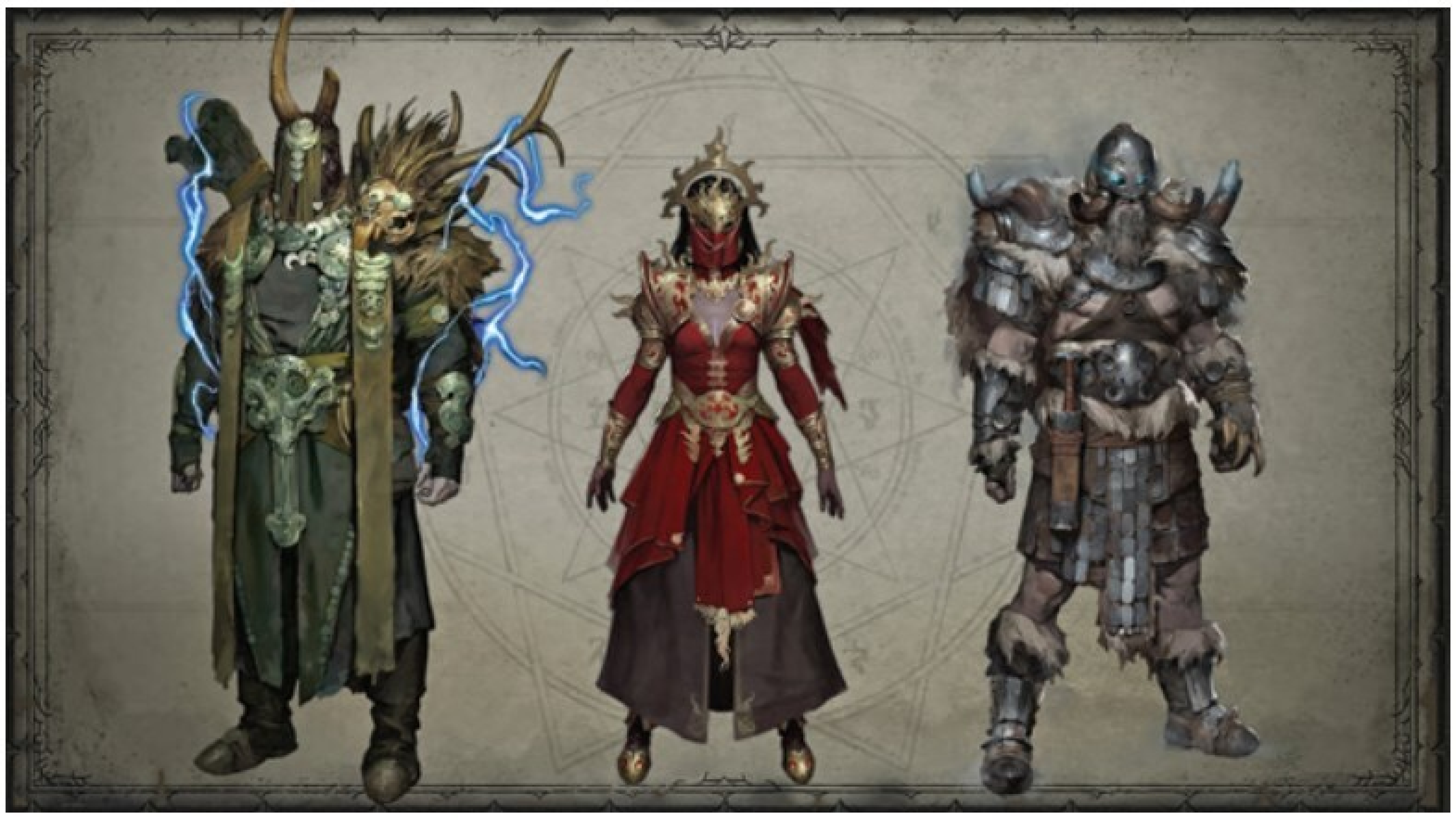
Nearing the fort, I spy a treasure goblin running away from our group. He's functionally identical to what you've seen in Diablo III, but he's not the giggling goofball from that game. He's lithe and kind of creepy looking, and he isn't laughing it up as he flees from us. He's also a lot faster and harder to catch, but his telltale trail of gold betrays his location. After several escape attempts, we finally manage to wear him down and take his treasure before he's able to portal away.

"When we do things like that, we want to do them with intention," Shely says. "And they're all the more powerful when they are a contrast to a space that has rules and is grounded in a sense of place. We do that very carefully and with a lot of intention." I ask if we'll be seeing places like Whimsyshire or the Cow Levels in the game, and he pauses. "I don't know if we'll see something like Whimsyshire, which departs quite a lot, but we certainly have things like the treasure goblin that change the perspective or stand out or contrast."

Inside the hold, we face swarms of Fallen. The shaman make things difficult, as does the fact that we're all five levels below the mobs we're up against. Going alone seems foolish, so we do our best to stick together. The Fallen have set up shop inside this abandoned fort, and our job is to destroy their three idols. These crude constructs are easy to find, but damaging them seems to draw the ire of nearby Fallen, including some of their elite mobs. This is where things can quickly get out of hand.

In one room, we encounter a cursed chest, which illustrates this point. "You can have either a cursed chest where skeletons appear, or you can have the Altar of Bishibosh appear," says Zaven Haroutunian, lead dungeon designer. "If you remember, Bishibosh was notably the only shaman in Diablo II that could res shamans. So we have the Altar of Bishibosh in Diablo IV as a random event that can show up, and one of the things that happens in that event is when the avatar of Bishibosh itself shows up, it can resurrect all the shamans in that event and they can in turn res all the other guys."

Blizzard is further expanding on the idea of elite affixes in Diablo IV and making them more closely tied to the monsters' innate abilities. "One of the really powerful things about doing that we've encountered as we've been doing these is that we get a lot more variety out of the same affix when it's affected by how the monster behaves." Shely says. "Because we have lots of different monsters, if one affix can be different depending on the monster it's applied to, then we have a lot more permutations of how that can play out in combat. A great example of this is the



multishot affix." The gist of this one is simple: If an elite enemy usually tosses out a single spear, the multishot affix allows him to throw out three. That carries over to however the elite attacks. "So if the avatar of Bishibosh gets multishot, it can res multiple shaman," Haroutunian says.

We see this play out firsthand in a large hall, where Fallen seem to revive the instant they're killed. I lurk around the corner of the fight and find several shaman just out of reach. Even taking them out doesn't help, since Bishibosh is able to revive them. The choice is clear: Bishibosh must die. We focus fire on the elite enemy, doing our best to stay alive while getting pelted by every other Fallen in the room.

Our persistence pays off, and we once again head back to town. There are still a few more tasks to complete before we make our way out of this godforsaken place. Those power stones seem as though they're worth visiting, and we should probably retrieve Kayla's dagger from Bur'Zog. There's a lot of evil in this world, and its unreasonable to think that we'll be able to vanquish it all. At least, not now. ◆

Visit gameinformer.com/blizzard throughout the month for more info on Diablo IV

REDEFINING WHAT A SEQUEL CAN BE

OVERWATCH 2 *embraces story as much as competitive play, and is poised to shake up the video game industry's approach to series continuations*

by
ANDREW REINER

» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» STYLE
1 to 12-Player
Online Shooter

» PUBLISHER
Blizzard Entertainment

» DEVELOPER
Blizzard Entertainment

» RELEASE
TBA

No player left behind. Everybody wins. This type of messaging is hammered home numerous times by the Overwatch development team during my two-day visit to Blizzard Entertainment's studio in Irvine, California. These statements are said with conviction, and they are easy to believe when you hear what Blizzard is cooking up for Overwatch 2.

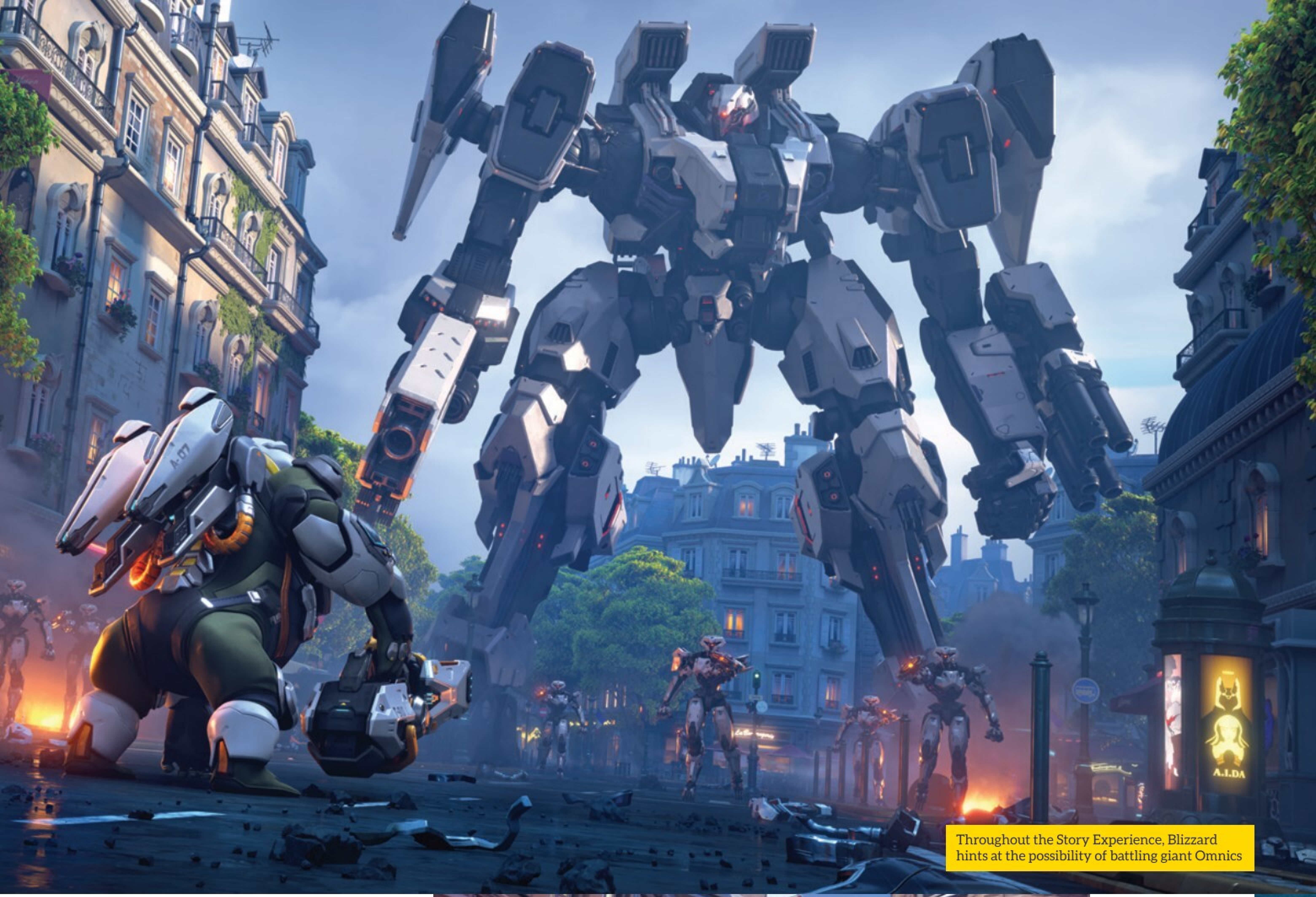
When Activision launches a new Call of Duty or EA Sports kicks off another football sea-son with Madden, the previous iterations in these series lose most of their value. The player bases shrink, and the content isn't as relevant. Not everyone buys the sequel, however, and if they do, there's a chance it won't be near release day. Blizzard doesn't want anyone to miss out on the chance to play Overwatch 2, even if they don't purchase it … ever.

"We have over 50 million people playing Overwatch," says game director Jeff Kaplan. "Thinking about releasing a sequel, there's no part of us that wants to abandon the current audience. With the introduction of Overwatch 2, we are going to make sure original Overwatch players can play PvP with Overwatch 2 players."

Breaking away from the walled-garden approach to sequels, all of Overwatch 2's new PvP content will be playable in Overwatch, free of charge to people who own the first game. Only the PvE modes are reserved for those who purchase the sequel.

This means every new map, PvP game mode, and hero to appear in Overwatch 2 will also be available in the original Overwatch. On the flip side of the coin, if Overwatch 2 adopters are fearful of losing the skins and victory poses earned while playing Overwatch 1, all cosmetic content carries over into the sequel. No player – or PvP content – is left behind.

If this innovative approach to a sequel succeeds, it could send a shockwave through the video game industry. Just think how great it would be if the Ultimate Team cards purchased in FIFA 20 carried over into FIFA 21. Blizzard is hoping this sequel is transformative,



Throughout the Story Experience, Blizzard hints at the possibility of battling giant Omnics

much like its decision to not sell maps and heroes in the original Overwatch. If gamers love seeing their hard work and purchases carry forward, the demand for it in other game franchises will likely be shouted across the internet.

Overwatch was primarily a competitive multiplayer game, yet players ended up falling in love with this universe's story, which, outside of appearing lightly in timed PvE events, is mostly told through Blizzard's beautiful animated shorts, comic books, and even the official cookbook.

Story is a central focus in Overwatch 2, and you don't need to hunt outside the game to find it, as PvE is just as prevalent as PvP. Players are invited to enter a complete story experience with up to three friends at their side, and then, once the credits roll, jump into new hero-specific missions for even deeper PvE content.

These PvE modes won't be accessible to people who own just Overwatch. Those players are going to miss out on what truly makes Overwatch 2 shine as a sequel. I played one of the story missions, and found it to be every bit as fun and deep as Overwatch's PvP, which is saying a lot for a game that scored a perfect 10 out of 10 from *Game Informer* in 2016.

EXPANDING THE GAME'S SCOPE

Work on Overwatch 2 began in earnest in early 2015, right alongside the development of Overwatch. The notion of a sequel being created well before the first game was even finished may sound a bit backward, but Blizzard dreamed big out of the gate, and developed a clear roadmap for what Overwatch could be as a complete franchise. Those plans included auxiliary entertainment forms, as well as other game ideas. By working ahead on concepts that would incubate for years, Blizzard was able to create the story foundation for its world and characters, enough of which was sprinkled into the original Overwatch to make fans rabid about it.

"We know there's this hunger from our audience to see more," Kaplan says. "They want to see the universe sort of evolve and include more members in the gaming community. There are also people who are in love with the franchise and characters, but just don't want to play PvP. We want to open the doors to them."

The player can select one of six different talents before entering a Hero Mission

Some of the early PvP experiments transformed into game modes like Junkenstein's Revenge, which gave players a small taste of PvE just months after launch, followed by the Archives missions in the years ahead. All of those missions were viewed as proof-of-concepts by the team that didn't deliver enough longevity. They weren't marquee destinations, which is one of the reasons why Blizzard made them timed events.

"With the game we are making now, we intend for PvE to be an end destination," Kaplan says. "If a player just wants to be a PvE player, they can live in the PvE world, whether it's the Story Experience or Hero Missions."

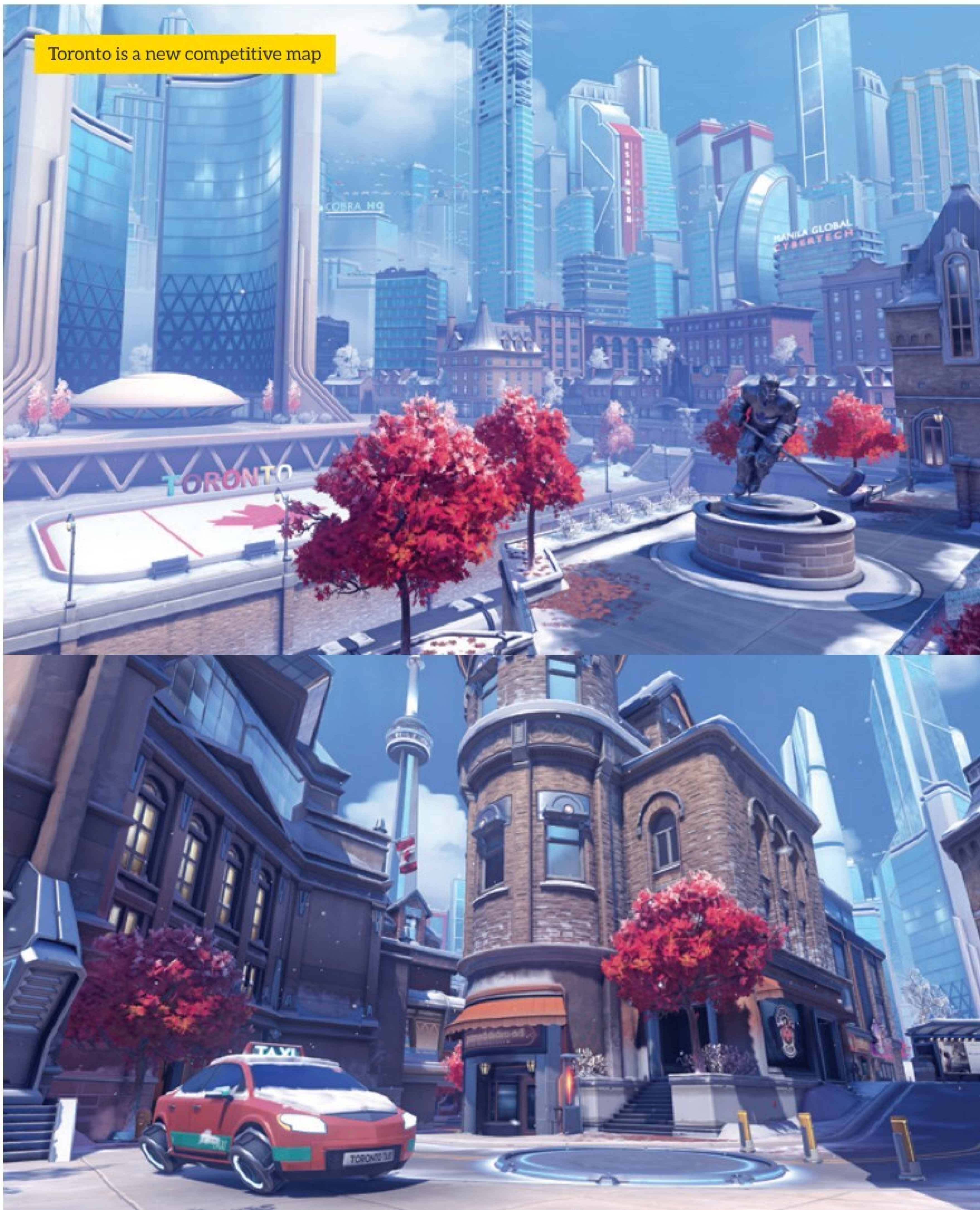
For the last few years, the development team has been working on tools for the PvE experience. These tools are custom-tailored for Overwatch 2. Within seconds of stepping into one of Overwatch 2's story missions, you see the scope of the experience is much bigger than the Archives missions from Overwatch. More enemies populate the screen, scripted events occur to bring a cinematic flair to the battles, and the backgrounds are even filled with distant wars or animations to steal away your attention. It's reminiscent visually of the early Halo games, but Blizzard has no intention of locking the player into the role of just one character like Master Chief for the entire story. Overwatch 2 is still a game defined by its wide selection of heroes, and pushing players to use their skills as a team to overcome great threats.

"I think when Overwatch is at its very best, a player is at the very edge of what their limits are," says Aaron Keller, assistant game director. "The player is playing as a hero that has all of these abilities, has to synergize with his or her team, and is almost forced to do all of that to be successful. Our desire is to bring that type of experience over to the PvE and cooperative side of this game. I don't think that's something I've ever played, at least to the point that Overwatch 2 pushes you to."

Blizzard compares Overwatch 2's PvE to World of Warcraft in terms of skill and challenge. The first mission in World of Warcraft is ridiculously easy and is a welcoming introduction, yet on the extreme opposite of the spectrum, you find missions designed for hardcore raiding guilds to see if they have the skills to topple a new boss. Blizzard wants Overwatch 2's PvE to mirror this sort of progression. The team is considering a variety of difficulty settings (currently set at four) and are looking at ideas that will make things even more challenging on the top difficulty.

GETTING THE TEAM BACK TOGETHER

Within the simply named Story Experience, Overwatch 2's tale begins on a somber note, set 61 years in the future, just a year after the events of the first Overwatch. Within a beautifully animated CG sequence, piano notes ring out slowly, eventually forming the full



Toronto is a new competitive map

CROSS-PLATFORM PLAY & UNIVERSAL ACCOUNTS?

Blizzard would love to see Overwatch 2 players on PlayStation 4 playing against Overwatch 1 players on Xbox One, and is exploring cross-platform play, but has nothing to share on the subject at this time. The same goes for universal accounts, which would allow a player to have the same skins they unlocked on PC in their Switch game.

Overwatch theme, but its triumphant melodies now sound tired and broken.

Winston and Mei stand forlornly in the living quarters of a dropship not unlike the one players have come to know so well as a pre-game lobby.

"Winston," says Mei in a concerned tone. "Do we have enough people for this mission?" Mei's eyes lock onto the barren seats once occupied by the Overwatch team.

"As long as we stay together, we'll be fine," Winston responds as confidently as he can.

We then see that this isn't a two-person operation after all; Tracer is also along for the ride. She is as chipper as ever, zipping through her dialogue as quickly as she does from the ship to the cockpit.

This skeleton crew is investigating recent Null Sector activity in Paris.

As a side note, Kaplan tells us that the Paris map players have been battling on since January was created in conjunction with the animated intro movie called "Zero Hour," but the team wanted to get it in front of players as soon as possible, even though it is was originally meant for Overwatch 2.

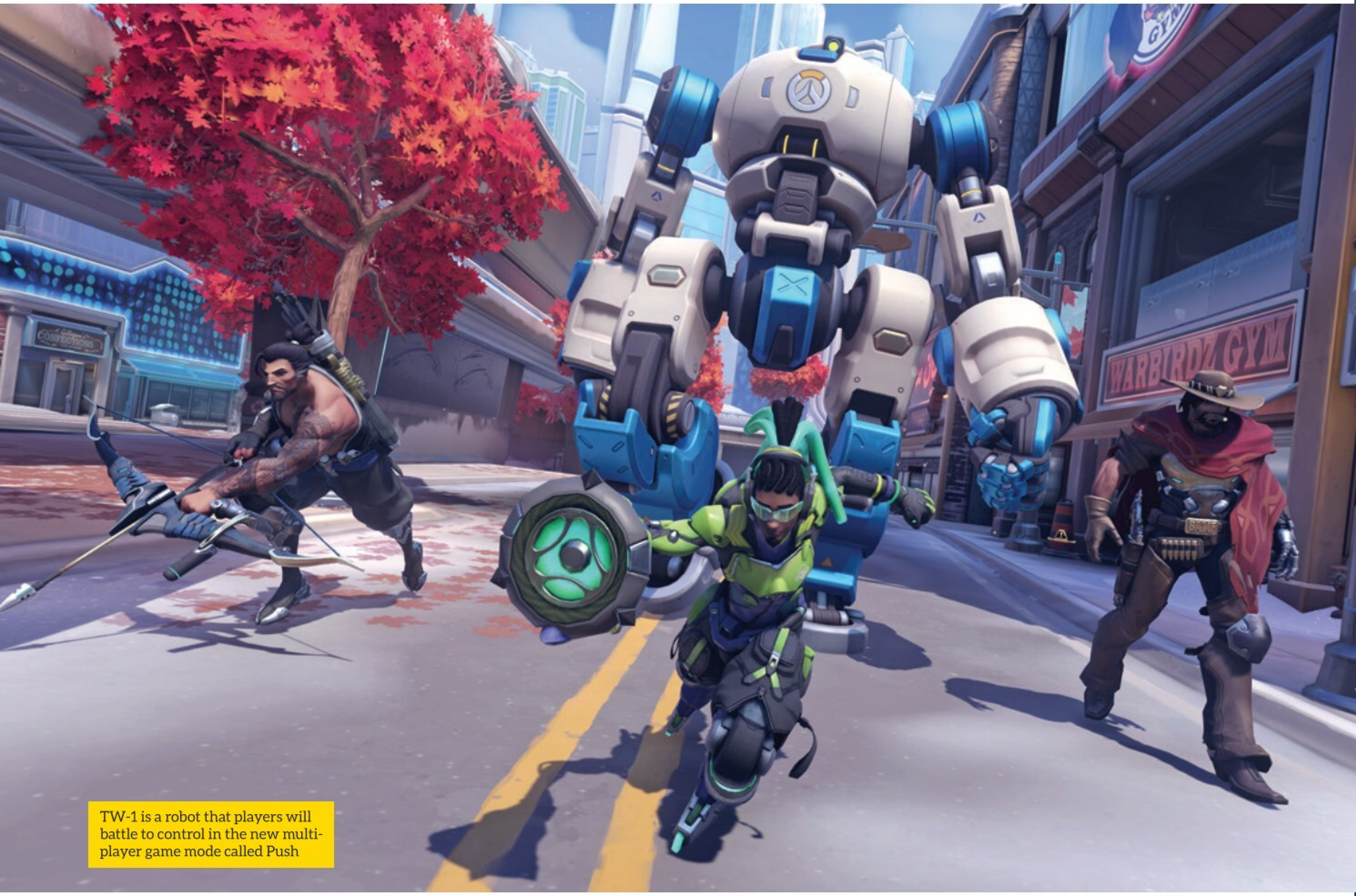
As the dropship descends from Paris airspace, it takes position over the heart of Null Sector's activity in a residential district, and Winston wastes no time making his presence known, leaping to action before the vessel even touches down. The rattling of gunfire between Paris' police and the Omnics rings out, but the battle is upended by the might and quick thinking of Overwatch's heavily armed gorilla. "Bonjour," Winston exclaims just as an Omnic topples over. "We're here to help."

We also hear another voice extend a welcome to the locals, that of Echo, who is also aboard the ship. We don't know if Echo is playable in Overwatch 2 yet, but she has been teased as an integral figure in the lore since the earliest concept art for the game. She's as mysterious in this cinematic sequence as she was in the *Reunion* animated short, but given her appearance here, which makes her look like an Overwatch team member, she must be a central player in Overwatch 2.

Blizzard won't say much about what is happening in Overwatch 2's story just yet. We know that Null Sector is on the attack again – we just don't know why. "The last time we saw them was back in King's Row in the Uprising mission," Kaplan says. "But it seemed to be a localized, minor threat. What's going on now seems much more global and has the citizens of the world fearful that this is another Omnic Crisis. [This is] much like the first one that led to the formation of Overwatch."

Null Sector's activity begins with bipedal ground troops called Nullifiers, but eventually escalates to the reveal of a towering white robot that stands at least 100 feet tall and is armed to the teeth. This impressive machine roars ominously before unleashing a powerful molten beam down the street toward Winston and his team. They seek cover, but leave the dropship fully exposed. It's sliced cleanly in two, and Mei is also injured in the blast.

For the sake of spoilers, I won't detail what happens next and urge you to watch the video online, but I can safely say the battle in Paris leads to the reformation of Overwatch, and includes some other old faces who come out of retirement. Mei, Winston, and Tracer are reunited with Reinhardt, Brigitte, and Genji. The team has reassembled in the face of Null Sector's unexpected global onslaught, which now has Rio de Janeiro in its sights. That's where Overwatch is heading next, and is the starting point that kicks off the new Story Experience.



TW-1 is a robot that players will battle to control in the new multiplayer game mode called Push

FUTURE HEROES

"We know the heroes are the epicenter and beating heart of Overwatch, so we wouldn't make any Overwatch experience, let alone Overwatch 2, without introducing new heroes," says game director Jeff Kaplan. We can assume that Echo will be one of these new recruits, but for the time being, Blizzard doesn't want to give away her role yet. Whenever we ask about her, the answers allude to her being mysterious and different, but no one on the team goes much further than that. All we really know is that Echo was incapacitated for an unknown amount of time and was being transported within the payload along Route 66. She seems powerful and flight-capable, and could be a nice counter to Pharah.

The only confirmed character Blizzard has said is a new hero is Sojourn, a former Overwatch member who played a prominent role in the Archives: Storm Rising mission. Sojourn is the character who organized the strike team to hunt down Doomfist by first locating his accountant, Maximilien. Sojourn seems like she will be a DPS character, but we still don't know her weapon of choice, although her character art makes her look like she has several cybernetic implants.

During my trip to Blizzard, Kaplan gave me a brief PowerPoint presentation about the changes coming to Overwatch 2. When the topic of new heroes came up, he showed me a slide with four silhouetted figures. These four heroes are coming to the game. The slide was only on screen for a few seconds, but it was long enough to reveal a crazy new idea for a hero. From what I could make out, this hero (who appeared to be female) is joined by a knee-high animal that has long pointy ears and an equally long tail. It looks a bit like a fennec fox. The art implies this creature will be involved in combat, maybe always at her side or joining her for Ultimate attacks like Ashe's B.O.B. Her weapon of choice is a giant four-sided melee weapon that looks like the shuriken Yuffie wields in Final Fantasy VII, but is much thicker. Whether she uses it for melee strikes or throws remains to be seen.

Of the four characters, three appeared to be female, but again this is just a guess as it's hard to make out the forms given the garments each wore. The other character that stood out to me appeared to be some kind of warlock, wizard, or voodoo priest. This character held a crooked staff and had a cloak with a hood, but the cloak was much shorter than you would expect, going no further down than the torso. I couldn't decipher much from the other two heroes, and would say they looked fairly normal from a silhouette perspective.

hero, the player is asked to select which talent they bring into battle – a new wrinkle in Overwatch. This talent-select screen is designed specifically for Hero Missions (see Powering up the Heroes section on page 51), but since Blizzard didn't have one of these missions playable at this point in development, it decided to add the talents to the Story Mission to give me a taste of what the team is cooking up. This experiment has proven to be popular internally, so much so that the team is thinking about keeping it in the final game.

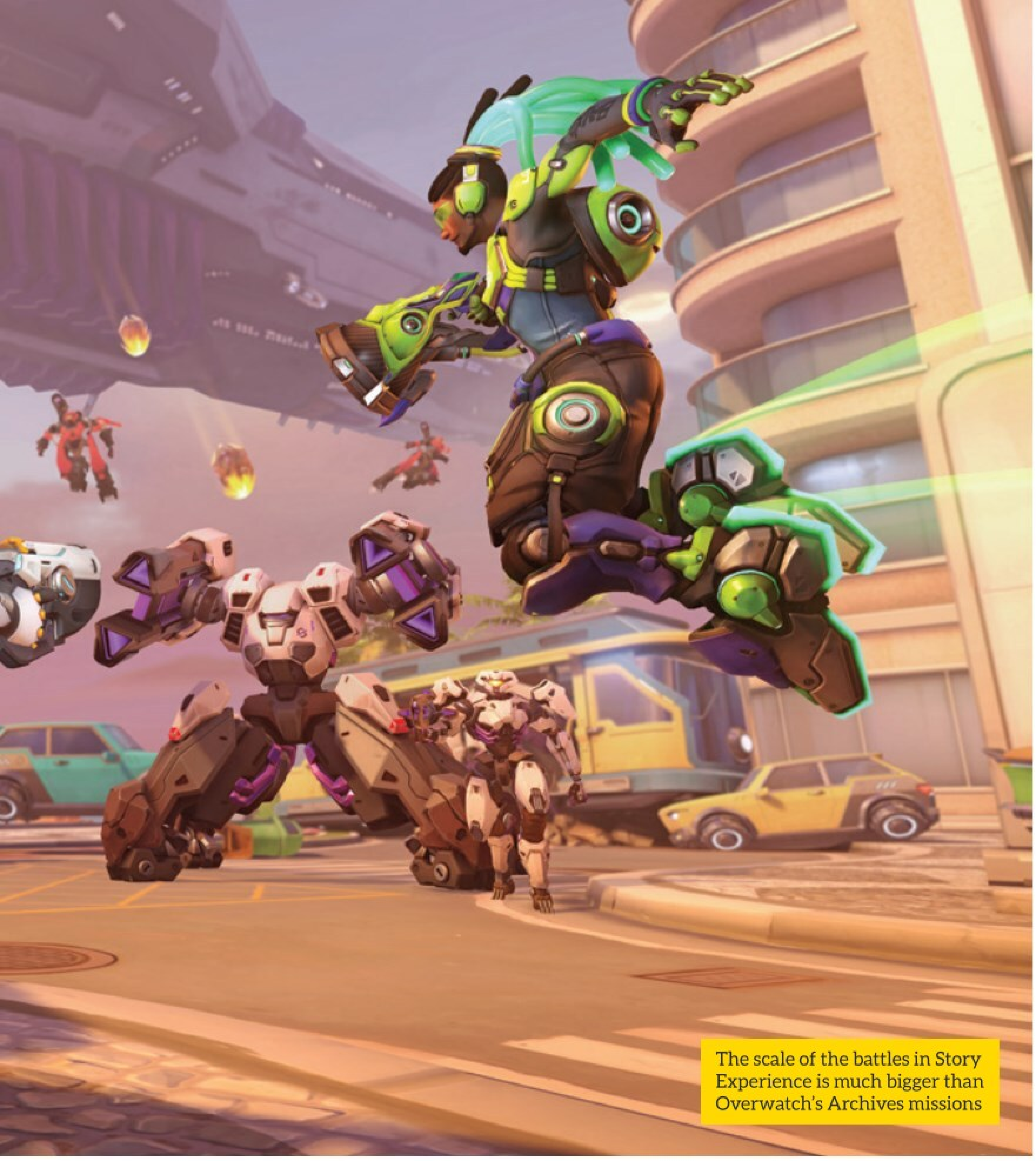
Only two talents are active in this mission for each hero, but we see that up to six can be unlocked over time – at least that's the number Blizzard has in mind at this point. I begin the game as Reinhardt, who can use either the Fire Burst or Frenzy talents. I go with Fire Burst, which augments Fire Strike and makes it explode and light nearby enemies on fire each time it successfully hits a target. As for the Frenzy talent, Rocket Swing becomes faster as consecutive hits are chained together.

In addition to the talents, for all PvE modes (and only PvE modes), Blizzard is powering up and tweaking specific abilities for each hero. When Reinhardt's Barrier absorbs damage, his Ultimate powers up. He also moves faster with Barrier deployed.

Sitting to my left, *Game Informer's* video editor Leo Vader selects Lucio, who has a Healing Wave talent that powers up Soundwave to heal 25 percent of teammate health, and a Mashup talent that plays both songs for Amp It Up. One of Lucio's co-op-only alterations is booping an enemy into a wall to stun them.

Within just moments of jumping into the war in Rio, two things become clear: The flow of the action is far more cinematic, and each battle is balanced to be intense to the point that players need to team up and coordinate just like they do in PvP play. The Omnic forces are much more dynamic in how they descend on the battlefield: Some come running in along the streets, and others, like the new Orbiter unit, enter from the skies. Orbiters are aerial units that fly closely together in chain formations much like ships you see in side-scrolling shooters. I quickly learn that one carefully placed Fire Strike from Reinhardt can mow down an entire Orbiter group if angled just right.

As we pick away at the Omnic swarms, we are rewarded periodically with loot chests, which materialize in the world at the conclusion of some battles. The chest holds four different items, one for each member on the team. In this instance we are offered four common rarity items: a corrosive grenade that eats away at enemies and makes them take on 30 percent more damage, an armored turret that has 1,000 HP, and



The scale of the battles in Story Experience is much bigger than Overwatch's Archives missions

THE STORY YOU ASKED FOR

Overwatch 2's story has been years in the making, with most of its plot points extending into the animated shorts Blizzard periodically releases online. These brief looks into this science-fiction universe usually shine a spotlight on a specific hero to tell a key moment in their life. Collectively they add up to a story Blizzard calls "The Recall," which shows us Winston's efforts to reform his team.

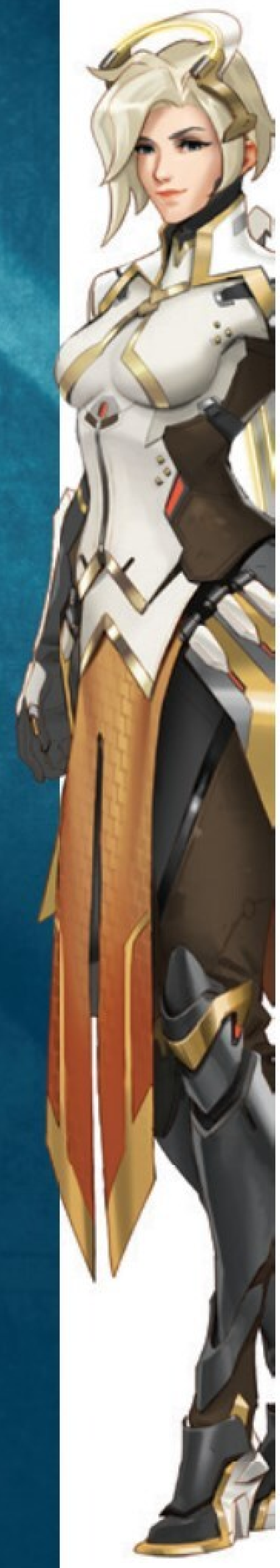
The first Story Experience mission begins with Overwatch taking the newly minted Overwatch Shuttle into Rio airspace. Unlike the CGi intro movie, this scene is created entirely in-engine, yet still looks great in terms of the character model detail, their facial animations, and the sheer amount of action littered liberally across the environments. As I get my first good look at Rio, I see the Christ the Redeemer statue on Corcovado mountain in the distance; his arms are spread wide, untouched by the war that wages within the heart of the city. This section of Rio basks in a golden sunlight and looks like a tranquil place transformed into a warzone, its buildings collapsing under Null Sector's forces. They didn't come to Rio for an isolated attack – this appears to be an invasion. Aircraft rocket overhead, soldiers line the streets, and a huge command ship hovers ominously in the distance.

Although Overwatch is back together, they are not like the X-Men with a unified look. They are more like the Avengers, wearing their own colors and styles. They arrive at the right time to meet a powerful local ally. It's Lucio, who, in a bit of surprise, introduces himself to the members of Overwatch, showing us that he hasn't met them yet at this point in the story.

Since Rio is Lucio's hometown, we are treated with a visit to his home, a place where his accomplishments are on display, with platinum albums on several walls. This is a slower moment – the calm before the storm – and Lucio's home basically becomes the pre-game lobby, complete with a soccer ball to knock around and a few items to smash.

"We definitely are going to have the big moments, big explosions, and big plot beats, but I think one of the real elements of Overwatch are the slower character beats," says lead writer Michael Chu. "As much as the game is fast-paced PvE, we are going to find slower moments where we can dive into the character relationships with each other, and the character relationships with the world. We definitely feel like those quieter beats help make Overwatch what it is."

Much like Overwatch's Archives missions, only four heroes can enter this mission. In this instance, it's Reinhardt, Tracer, Mei, and Lucio. When choosing a



two healing stations. When a healing station is placed in the environment, it heals 500 health. All of these items are reusable after a 90-second cooldown.

The idea of Reinhardt being able to toss out a turret just like Torbjörn sounds too good to be true, and I grab it hastily, as this chest is first come, first served. Once an item is snatched up, it's gone.

In the next battle, I ignite my shield, drop the turret, and look on in delight as it locks onto a couple of Orbiters and quickly drops them from the sky. It then locks onto an Obliterator, a larger unit with two giant cannons for arms that can be destroyed individually to limit the damage this foe delivers. Later in the level, I come across another loot chest that holds epic drops for the armored turret (now with 2,000 HP), corrosive grenade, and a new reusable item called a barrier fence, which creates an energy shield roughly 15 feet in circumference for players to use for protection.

We press on, and Overwatch decides to take the fight to the Null Sector command ship. We board the shuttle and Echo, who is the pilot, takes us right along the underbelly of this massive ship, giving us a cinematic breather before the chaos ensues again.

The command ship is not at all what I expected it to be – it also doubles as an Omnic factory, delivering new troops to the battlefield as soon as they are created. Some of the walls and ceilings are filled with conveyer belts that hold hundreds, if not thousands, of partially built Omnic bodies. To knock this big bird out of the sky, Overwatch needs to reach the innards of the vessel, where the reactor resides.

On a winding bridge that separates two of the ships' larger chambers, I see Tracer (who is controlled by an Overwatch 2 dev) take a shortcut, darting from one part of the bridge across open air to a doorway. I'm told that this quick leap wasn't the developer showing off his Tracer skills, and is in fact a path to a secret. This jump leads to a hidden ledge that holds the legendary version of the turret. Kaplan informs me that every hero should be able to reach secrets like this one. For Reinhardt, I'm guessing I would have to run along the top of a perfectly placed Mei Wall to access the platform.

After numerous conflicts against relentless and varied Omnic forces, like Skirmishers that leap into the air and hover, we eventually reach the reactor. Here, the Omnics press into us a little harder, and my health is depleted fully for the first time. Rather than dying or respawning, Reinhardt falls to one knee, but he can still move … slowly. I maneuver him behind a wall that will hopefully provide enough protection for Mei to revive him. This process takes a little bit of time, meaning there's a great risk/reward element to trying to bring someone back from the brink.

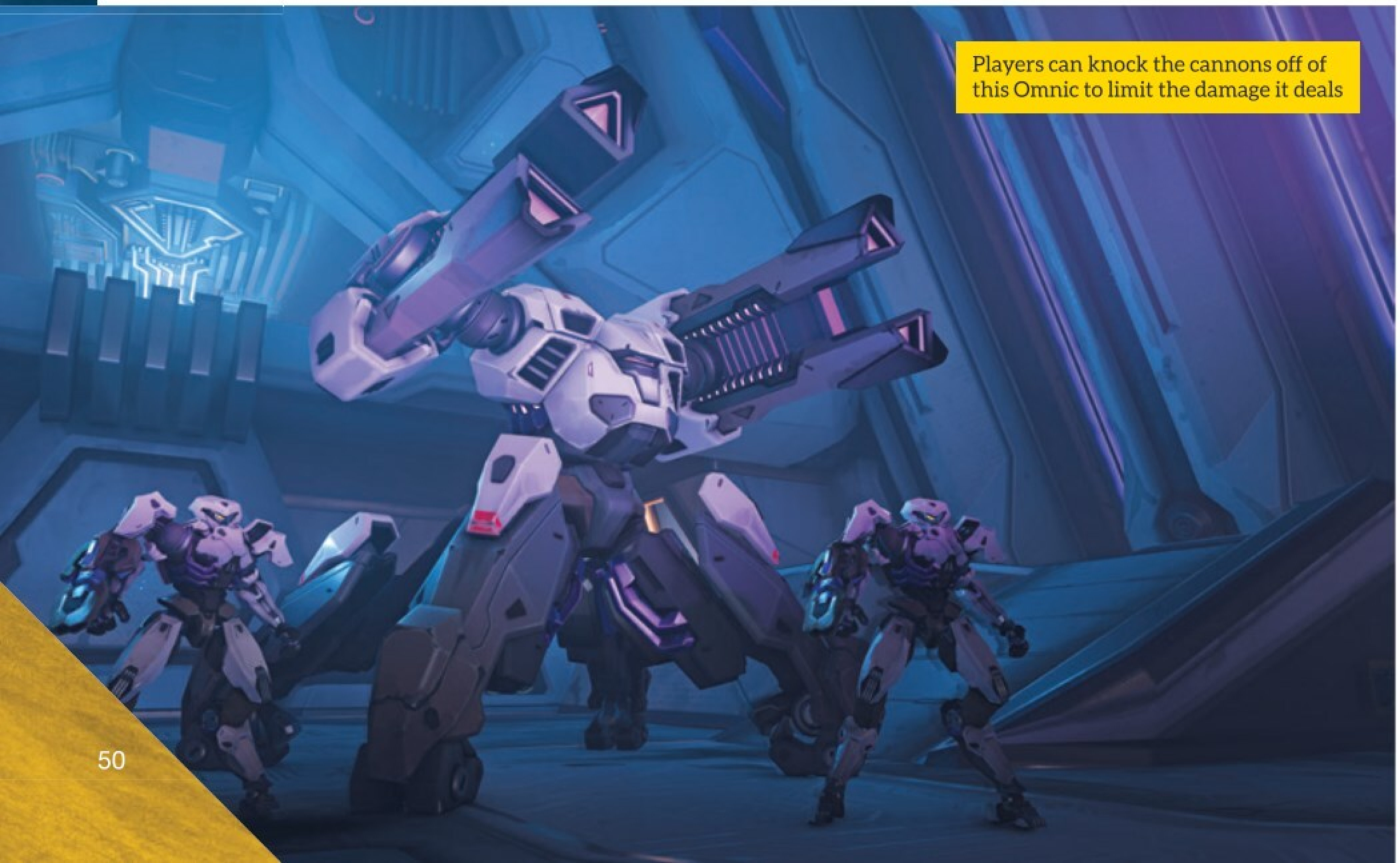
When the reactor core is eventually exposed, the entire team needs to attack it quickly, as it has a huge health meter, and at every 25 percent we chip away, the protective shield goes back up on it, bringing in more enemies. When only 25 percent is left, a chamber in the floor opens up, and reveals the game's first boss: a Behemoth. This Omnic stands in at roughly eight feet in height, and has a rhino-like horn on his head. It moves slowly, with heavy, lumbering steps, but is aggressive, and has a bit of Reinhardt in its programming, as one of its primary attacks is a lowered-shoulder dash. The Behemoth can also raise up an arm and slam it to the ground to electrify a large section of it with a purple energy charge, which slowly chews away at your health.

Once this challenging foe falls, and the reactor goes up in flames, we are tasked to flee the command ship before it explodes. We are given a minute and a half to race to the hangar as explosions litter our path with debris and Omnics try to slow us down.

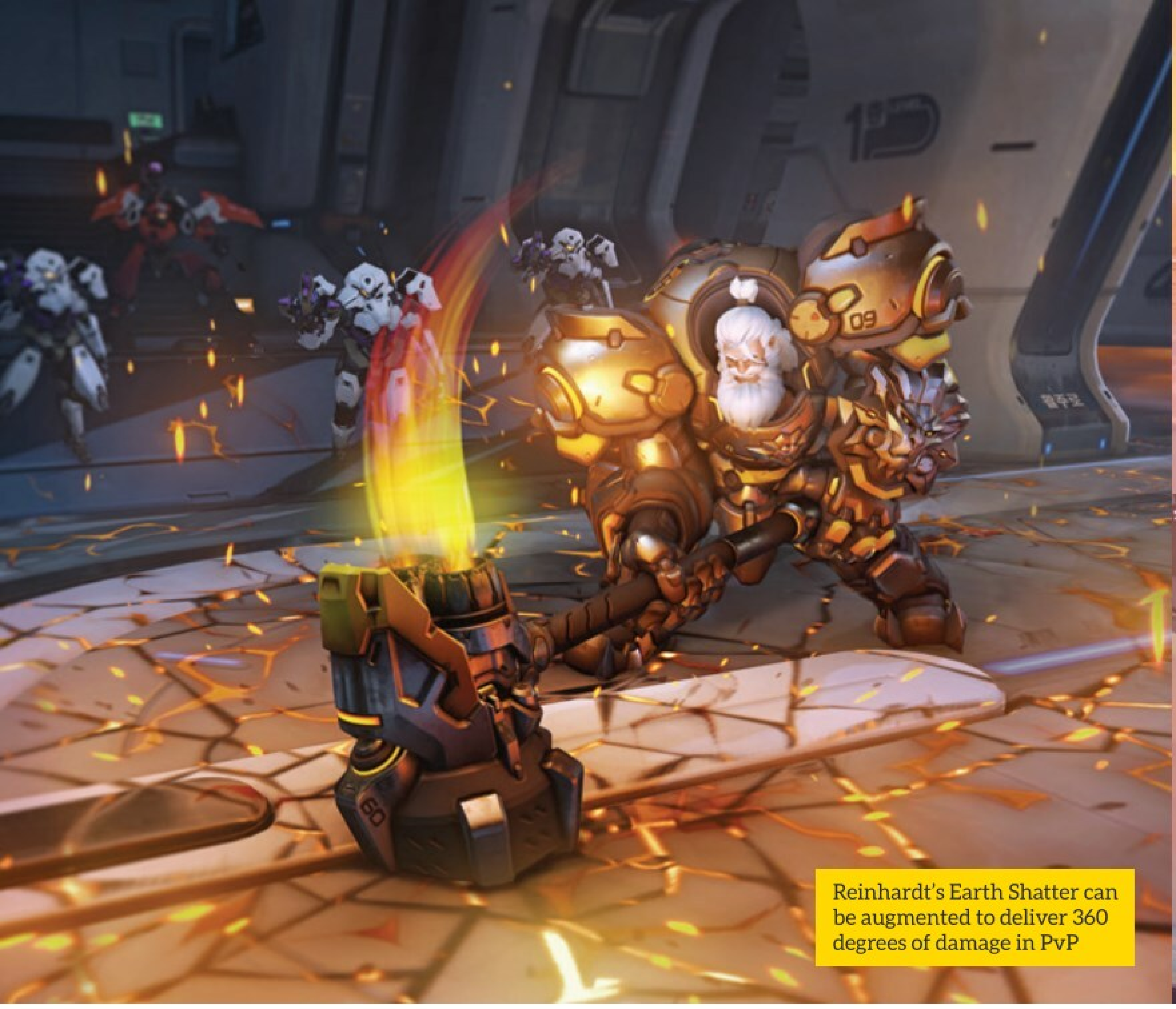
I thoroughly enjoyed the intensity delivered in this story mission. Several of our battles went down to the wire with three incapacitated teammates. We also were saved a couple of times by heroes using their Ultimates at right times. The boss was challenging, even on the normal difficulty we played on. We tried playing through this mission again on the expert difficulty, and successfully made it through a few battles, but ended up dying three times in the same conflict, resulting in a mission end. On normal, players get five restarts before having to try again.

Given how the story flows, it would make sense for these same four heroes to be back in the next story mission, but Kaplan didn't want to reveal what happens next, and in the same breath, assured us that this isn't a story about just these heroes. A good number of others will be playable as the tale unfolds, but not every one will make the cut. We were told Wrecking Ball won't be playable.

Since the game is still in development, Blizzard also doesn't want to say how long Story Experience is, or how many chapters it will consist of. We just know that it will end with credits and that new heroes (yes, plural) will be introduced as players march through it. Null Sector is the major threat, but Talon also gets involved. Talon is the organization that employs Reaper, Doomfist, Moira, and Widowmaker, and there's a good chance they could be adversaries, or perhaps a second playable team, which would speak to Blizzard's desire to get as many heroes in the spotlight as possible.



Players can knock the cannons off of this Omnic to limit the damage it deals



Reinhardt's Earth Shatter can be augmented to deliver 360 degrees of damage in PvP

POWERING UP THE HEROES

Each of Overwatch's heroes have defined powers and abilities that are carefully balanced for PvP. But what if Blizzard threw caution to the wind to show us just how powerful each one of these combatants can be? Overwatch 2 explores this idea in the Hero Missions, which are an entirely different avenue of play than Story Experience. You play as the hero of your choice who levels up, becomes stronger, and earns new talents.

The Hero Missions deliver additional storytelling, but don't expect lengthy cutscenes. Instead, Blizzard is adding small slivers of lore to the universe. You also need to have a little suspension of disbelief when going into these challenges, since Blizzard didn't want to restrict players with which heroes they select. For instance, Widowmaker may be on an assignment that rings true to her, but she's joined by Tracer (who your friend chose), a person she hates and never should be grouped with.

The plan, as of this writing, is for the Hero Missions to take place on all of Overwatch's existing and forthcoming maps. Each mission is made up of four variables: the map, heroes, objective, and enemy type (which is currently Talon and Null Sector, but Blizzard suggests there will be more). Changing just one of those variables creates a new outcome, suggesting there will be a huge number for players to take on.

This mode is still in the prototyping phase, but I did see some of the work in progress, which included visions of both Eichenwalde and Ilios at night. I also saw D.Va's Meka base in Busan is under attack, as part of it was on fire.

In terms of what players do in Hero Missions, Blizzard has two current examples. In Busan, your first goal is to clear out the Null Sector threat. After that, you are asked to defend a sector until a timer ticks down. The entire mission is said to be roughly 8 to 10 minutes in length. For Route 66, Blizzard pushes the players to reach two different points on the map, and then escort a payload to a dropship for extraction. Given that players are leveling up and gaining new powers, Blizzard believes this mode will deliver high levels of replayability and player choice.

"The progression system won't touch PvP at all," Kaplan says. "If you progress your Genji, it doesn't make you a more powerful Genji when you get into quick play or comp."

One of the things players will be unlocking for each hero are the talents I noted in the Story Experience. Kaplan takes me on a video tour that shows just how dynamic they can be. The first example is for Hanzo, who is perched atop a tan adobe building, overlooking a similarly colored courtyard filled with Omnics troops. This appears to be Rio again. Hanzo marks the area with a Sonic Arrow, which illuminates a good seven to eight enemies, some positioned at different elevation points. The arrow hits its mark, and then quickly zips through the heads of all of the other robots. They all collapse at once. "Clearly we would not do that in PvP," Kaplan jokes.

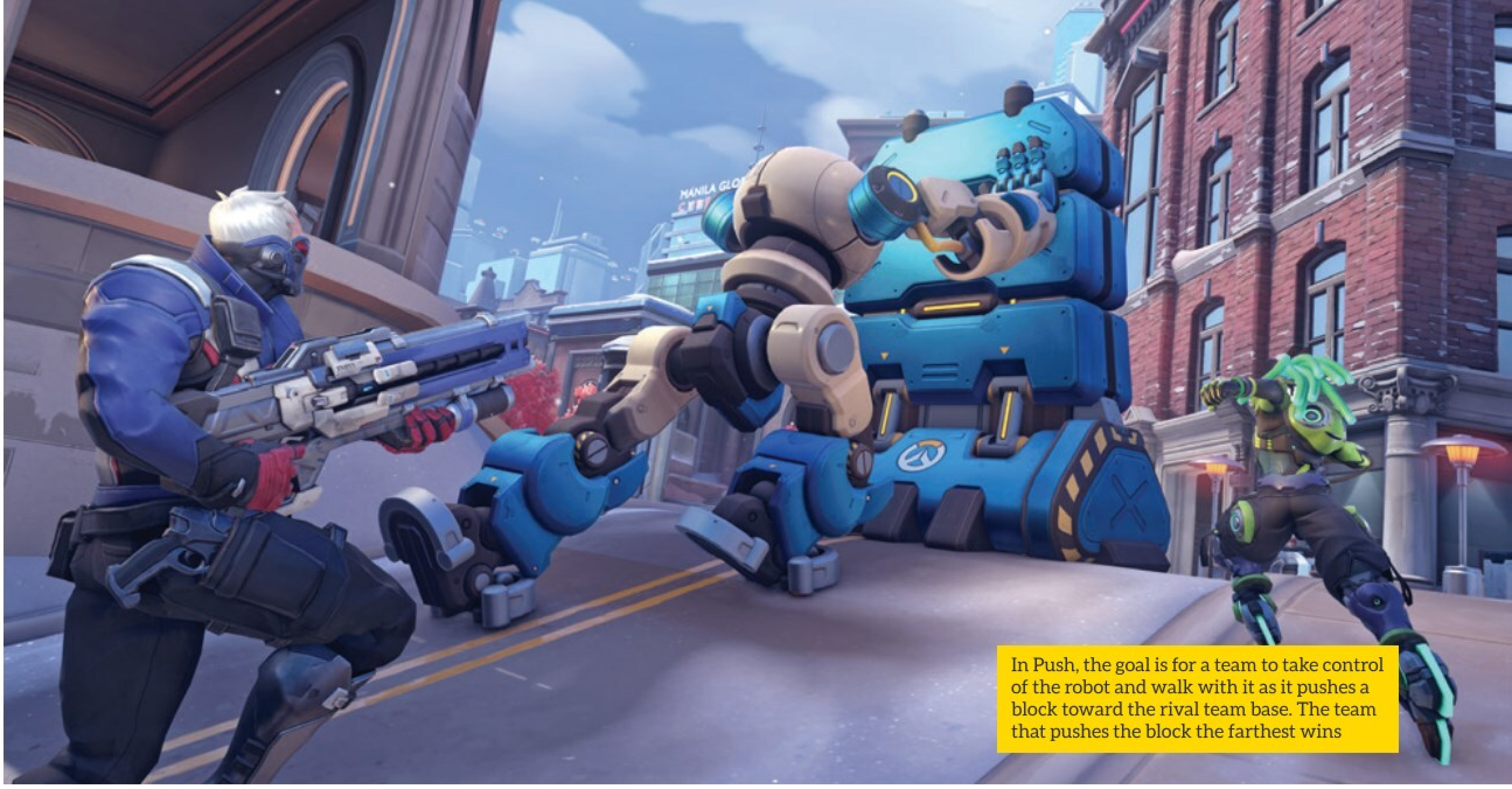
Next up we see how Tracer's speed can affect enemy troops. She finds herself in dangerous territory, standing in the middle of a group of Omnic Nullifiers. She uses Recall to maneuver out of danger, and the vacuum of air she creates pulls all the Omnics together, allowing for one carefully placed Pulse Bomb to take them all out. "You can see how the abilities can combo off of each other now," Kaplan adds. "Take Lucio's Fortissimo. As he hits enemies with his right click, his left click turns into a volley."

Kaplan describes Mei's Polar Vortex as an "uber vortex" that ignores line of sight and occupies a huge area. I see it in play in the same courtyard as Hanzo's talent, and when the freeze hits, it even catches enemies on higher elevations, turning them to ice. I also see Mei run a few steps and turn into her ice block. Rather than locking into place like she does in PvP, the block keeps her momentum, and ends up transforming into an unstoppable force that mows down a handful of troops.

"These are some of my favorites," Kaplan says as he queues up a video for two of Torbjörn's talents. "His machine-gun turret turns into a flamethrower, and instead of one big turret he can get three little ones." The smaller turrets are positioned in a triangular position on the sides of a path, creating a car-wash-of-death for the Omnics that enter.

Genji's Dragon Blade turns into Dragon Breath, and as you would expect, expels deadly energy projectiles each time its swung. "This one is good for me," Kaplan says with a slight pause. "Whenever I Dragon Blade, no one is near me. I'm always like, 'Where is everybody?'" Genji can also place a series of shuriken at the feet of enemies and then detonate them with a dash, meaning you can create a chain explosion that could lead up to a big boss or potentially take out numerous foes at once.

"For Hero Missions, the most important thing for us is the great amount of content," says Keller. The hope is that players get into these missions and play them for years.



In Push, the goal is for a team to take control of the robot and walk with it as it pushes a block toward the rival team base. The team that pushes the block the farthest wins

PUSHING COMPETITION TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Although PvE is a huge focus in Overwatch 2, it isn't detracting from PvP at all – both for what is offered and the development commitment Blizzard gives it. PvP is growing in size, and is getting a long overdue boost from a new mode that will be featured in Competitive play's rotation and also Overwatch League matches.

"Every time we've introduced a new game mode, it's been in quick play or the Arcade," says Keller. "We're really proud of those modes, but we have a really high standard for what can be considered for competitive. We actually experimented with quite a few modes until we finally zeroed in on Push."

In development, Push was originally called Tug of War, which should give you an idea of the battles' ebb and flow. The goal for each team is to rush to a robot, named TW-1 (although the Overwatch team just calls him "The Robot"), and if they are the first team there, he will begin walking toward the opponents' base. The team that pushes the robot the furthest wins.

TW walks along a line on the ground and cannot strafe at all. He just heads in the opposite direction of the team that controls him. The name convention "Push" comes from the physical activity TW performs. He extends his arms and puts his weight into a seven to eight-foot-tall block called a barrier marker. The distance he pushes the barrier marker is tracked and ends up being the scoring system. Meaning if blue team pushes the marker 30 feet, whereas red team only pushes it 15, blue team wins the match. Blizzard says most matches end with one team pushing it farther, but usually not to the end of the track.

TW moves slower when he is pushing the object, but picks up speed at the end of a match for overtime, which is handled just like a payload, where a team member has to be next to TW or the match ends.

Every Push map is symmetrical in design, like Control, but they are different because there's one, long axis down the middle of them. The architecture on both team sides may be different, such as shops and the like, but the geometry and runback times are nearly identical. These maps are designed with flanking in mind, allowing rival players to get behind your team as you push TW. "We're seeing a lot more Reaper and Sombra play in Push," Kaplan adds. "We're hoping this mode changes up the meta of the game in general."

I was given the chance to play three Push matches, all set on the new Toronto map, reminiscent of a winter wonderland. Like most of the map locations in the game, Toronto is thriving, clean, and its buildings and technology are state of the art. To hammer home a Canadian vibe, a red maple leaf is painted on the concrete in front of a giant statue of a hockey player. Most of the buildings are a few stories high, allowing for Pharah to jet over them.

What becomes apparent quickly with Push is how immediate the action is. Even after respawning, gaps in the buildings get me back to the fray

FUTURE MAPS

Game director Jeff Kaplan used his PowerPoint skills to tease a bunch of new maps coming to Overwatch 2. We know Toronto is one of them, and one slide showed Rio, which implies it won't just be in the Story Experience. I saw what could be five to six maps, but again, it's hard to figure out exactly how many, as one slide could just be showing a radically different area from the same map.

One shot showed the entrance of Iron Clad Industries, the factory where Torbjörn works. Another map shows Monte Carlo at night and consists of a waterfront for the rich, which is filled with docks and expensive yachts. A beautiful city stretches out from the docks and glows gold with light.

The images that catches my eye the most is from Gothenburg, the second largest city in Sweden, The image is highlighted with a copper statue of soldier riding a horse. The statue is green with age and is backed by a town, looking older in tone with triangular pointed rooftops, and two-to-three-story buildings in vibrant pink and orange. The road is cobblestone.

As for the flow of play we can expect from new maps, Blizzard is obviously looking at what worked in Overwatch 1, but also wants to take some chances to shake things up.

"We literally have a corkscrew on one map that wraps around," Kaplan says.

Assistant game director Aaron Keller, who has designed roughly half of the maps in Overwatch, cuts Kaplan off. "It's like the third or fourth corkscrew we've tried. There are so many issues with building it, but I think we cracked it this time."

"Usually the corkscrew only makes one playtest," Kaplan jokes. "This one has been around for a few months now. I think it's going to make it."

quickly. I begin by playing as Moira, my main, and learn I need to position myself a little differently, as hanging out in the back is bad news. The rival team is using Bastion and Soldier in the flank and are gunning for our support. I stick closer to TW who is pushing a barrier that won't break when it absorbs fire. He's basically the ultimate shield tank.

As the match timer nears its end, I find the scoring convention of Push is a bit challenging to make out at a glance, as the player needs to look at the numbers, which may come down to what is after the decimal point if the match is close. There's a chance scoring will be called out differently as development continues, but it's a small complaint in a mode I thoroughly enjoyed playing.

NEW HERO LOOKS

Much like someone's desire to purchase a new phone every year to get the sleekest and most powerful model available, Overwatch's characters have been redesigned (many slimming down) in the year that has passed in their universe.

A hero like Bastion may look like he's lost a few pounds, but his hit box – and every hit box in the game – remains unchanged. Blizzard is being extremely careful with this and doesn't want the new hero looks to mean they are harder to hit.

With under a dozen characters redesigned by the time of my visit, Blizzard can't say for certain if one character may look dramatically different, but wants to keep most of them familiar. "If you think of Batman over the years, and how many mediums he's been represented in, his look has changed quite significantly, but Batman always looks like Batman. We never accidentally mistake him for another superhero," Kaplan says.

To hammer home the new phone analogy, Reinhardt's armor, which is made by Brigitte, has been upgraded from version 08 to 09. His chest centerpiece is now the head of a lion. Lucio's hair now glows and pulses a neon green color, and Mercy's wings are much smaller. Bastion is wearing a baseball cap from Torb's factory. Genji is one of the most dramatically changed, and now wears track paints and a hoodie, although a new interpretation of his armor is under these garments.

"We identify the looks that make the characters identifiable," says assistant art director Arnold Tsang. "We updated the looks, but Tracer is still Tracer. She still has the silhouette of her hair, the orange visor and tights, and always looks like she's in movement with the blue trail. As a character artist though, I always look back at my work and say 'I could have done better.' People would look at Tracer and say 'Why did you give her Crocs?' This time around I made sure she had awesome kicks."

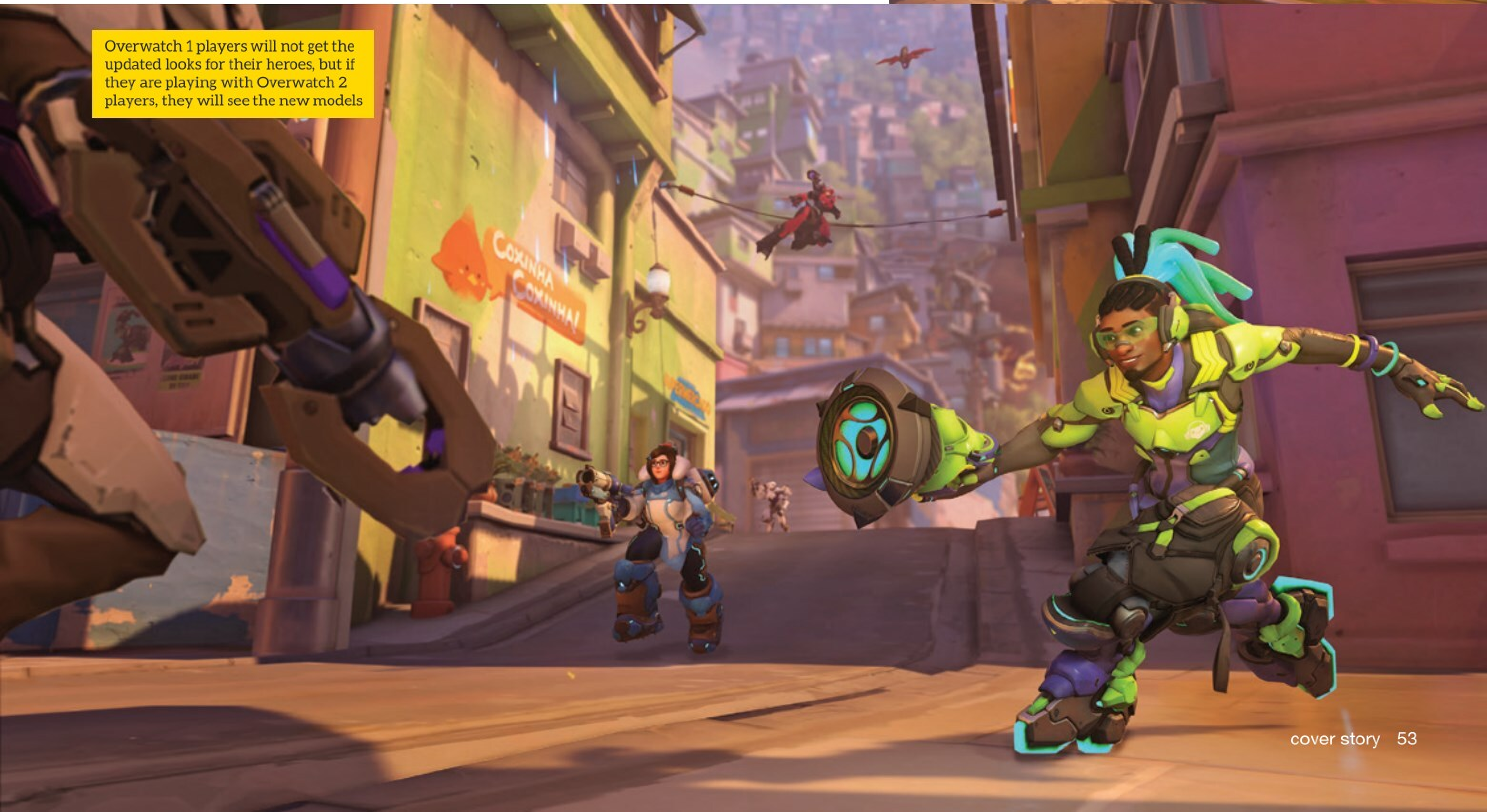
WHEN CAN WE PLAY IT?

Although Push and a story mission were payable at this year's BlizzCon, Blizzard isn't discussing a release date, or even a release year. "It's still too early to talk about that," executive producer Chacko Sonny says. "There's so much that we're still working on and figuring out. We're at an awesome phase right now where we're getting it all in shape and ready to share."

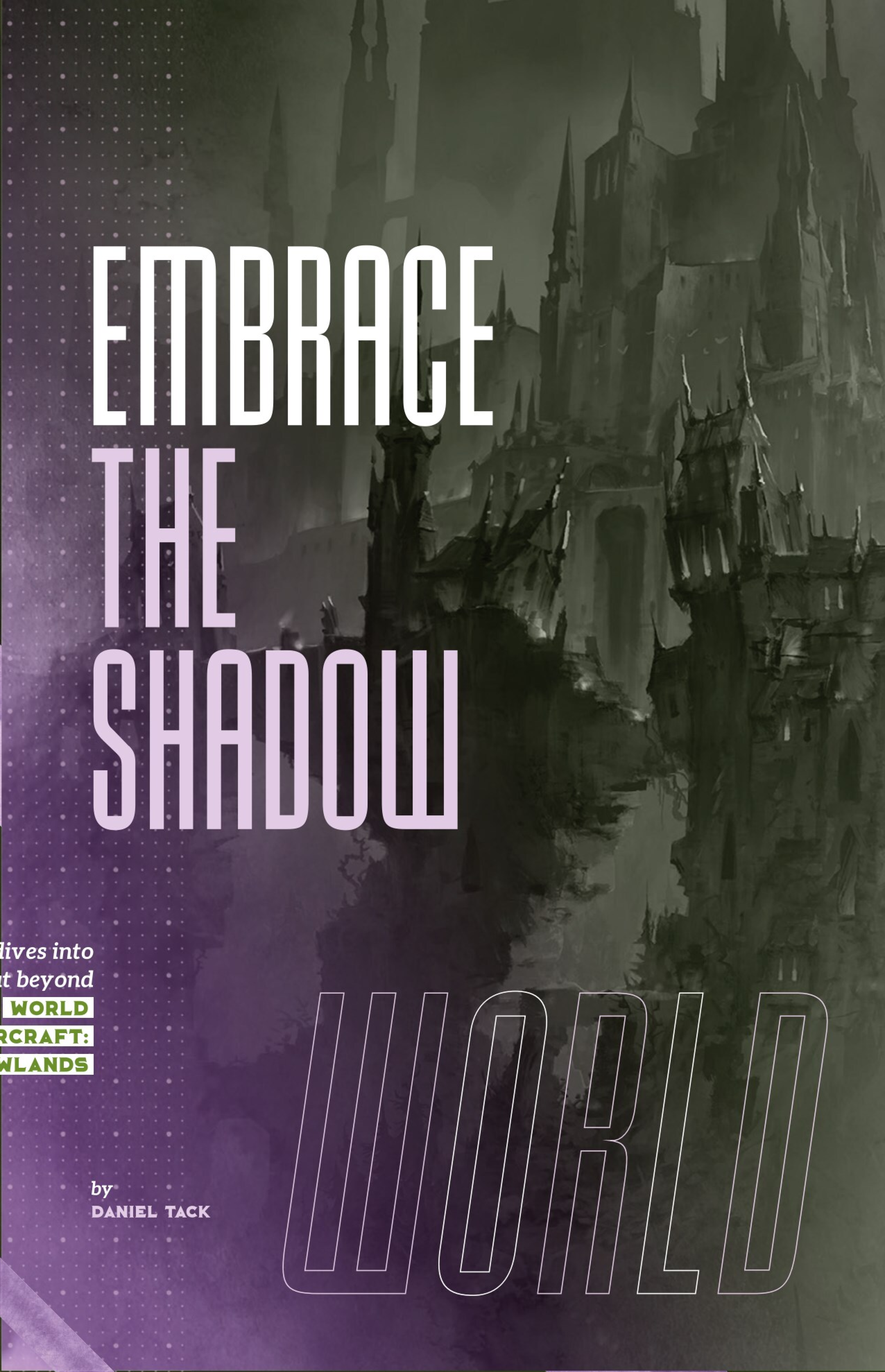
When that day does eventually arrive, Blizzard's hope is that Overwatch 2 will launch simultaneously on PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC, and Switch. The team wouldn't say if PlayStation 5 and Xbox One's successor (codenamed Project Scarlett) are in the cards, but I believe there's a chance those systems could be added to the lineup if Overwatch 2 launches in late 2020 or beyond. The team also didn't want to go into loot boxes or microtransactions just yet, as they are still trying to figure out the best approach for the new game.

From the small taste of Overwatch 2 I experienced, it feels like a natural and seamless extension of the great core that made the original game a runaway success, giving players more of what they love in new and familiar ways.

Head to gameinformer.com/blizzard for exclusive Overwatch 2 videos, screens, and artwork



Overwatch 1 players will not get the updated looks for their heroes, but if they are playing with Overwatch 2 players, they will see the new models



EMBRACE THE SHADOW WORLD

Blizzard dives into the great beyond with **WORLD OF WARCRAFT: SHADOWLANDS**

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» RELEASE
2020

OF WARCRAFT
SHADOWLANDS

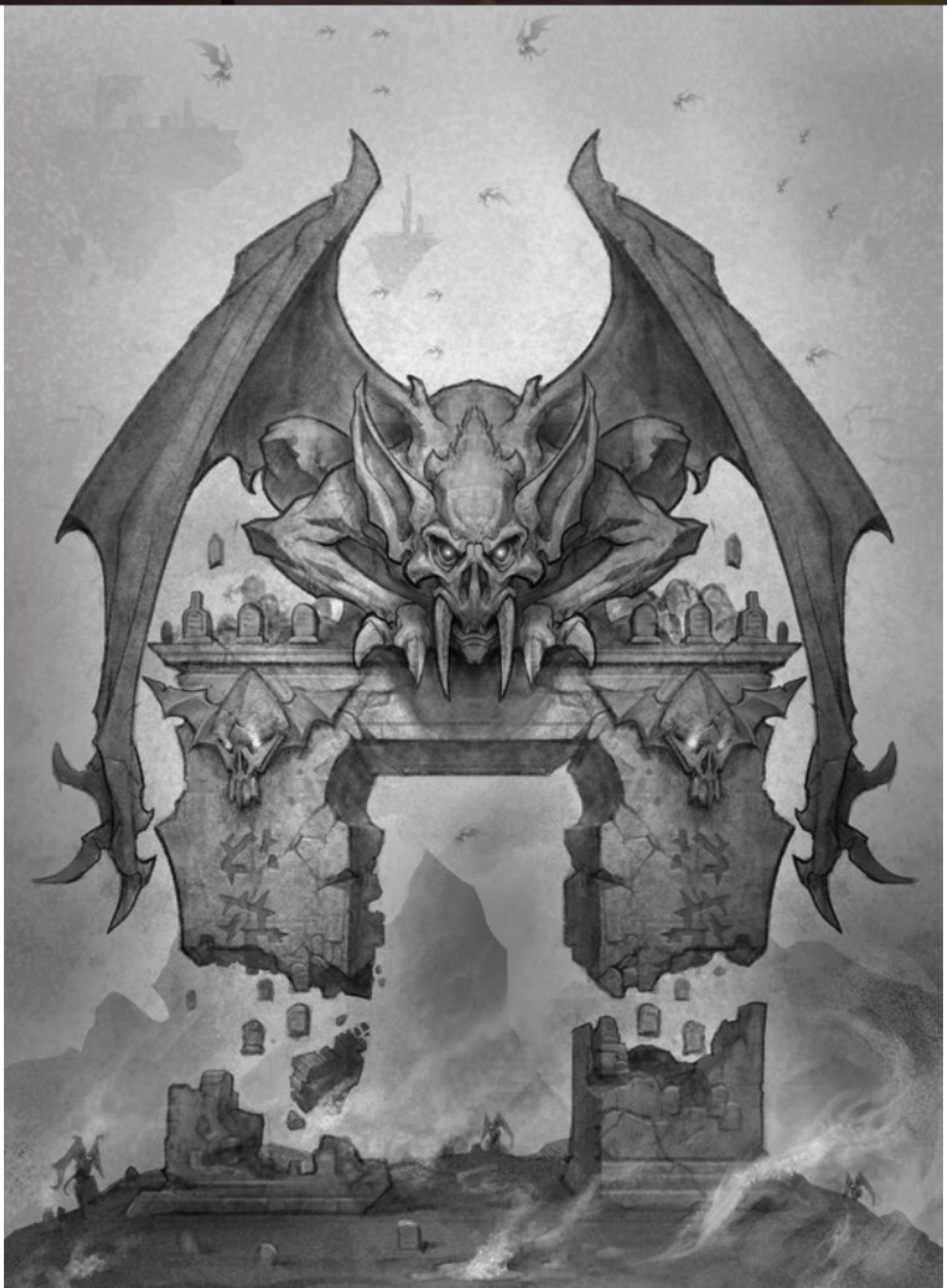
After 15 years of World of Warcraft, players who have climbed frozen thrones, defeated bloodthirsty orcs and gravity-bending princes, and explored Azeroth far and wide are entering uncharted territory: the afterlife itself. Whereas many previous adventures had clear starting points thanks to years of Warcraft history, the creation of a completely new plane of existence is a massive undertaking – and a huge step forward. Instead of being able to draw from known quantities, like how a troll village looks or an orc culture operates, these new, distinct realms show off the multiple places a soul can go after it passes. Does your journey in the Shadowlands end with you ascending to angelic grandeur in the Elysium-like fields of Bastion? Or perhaps you have misdeeds to answer for, your sins slowly being etched away through torture in the gothic spires of Revendreth. Along the way to a cap of level 60 (that's right, levels are being dialed back to a manageable state as part of this expansion), you'll get the chance to dive into the creatures, cultures, and curiosities in five disparate realms that deal with life, death, atonement, and ascension in vastly different ways. But how do you get there? Let's start at the beginning …

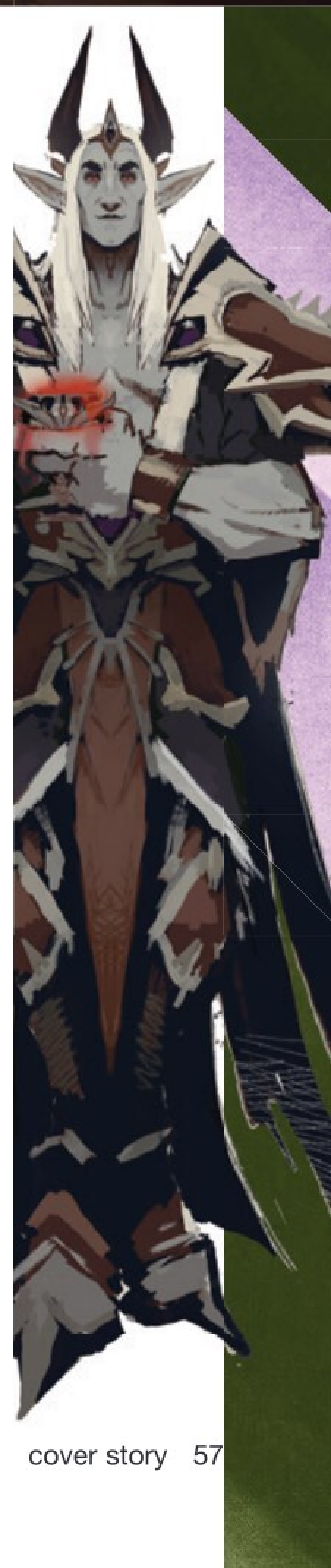
To kick things off in Shadowlands, players witness an epic conflict between the current Lich King, Bolvar Fordragon, and Sylvanas Windrunner. The Helm of Domination is destroyed by Sylvanas, causing a rift from Icecrown to open up into the spirit world that we, as players, can travel to and from. Of course, this poses many questions, as this seemingly breaks not only the rules of life and death, but also leaves us without a Lich King. Throughout the expansion's life cycle, we should get more answers on these unknowns and what they mean for Azeroth. Meanwhile, it seems Sylvanas's motivations may have been in league with a darker lord, one known only as the Jailer, a fearsome and terrifying enemy lurking in the darkest of all the afterlife realms, the Maw. This area is analogous to Hell, a doomscape for absolute irredeemables and the worst of the worst, a prison for nightmares that nothing can escape. From there, we discover that all the souls that have been dying in Azeroth over the last few expansions have been going to The Maw directly, without any chance of coming to their intended spirit zones. This sets the table for our journey through the Shadowlands.

While other expansions, such as Warlords of Draenor and Battle for Azeroth, let players "pick a path" through content, the leveling portion of Shadowlands is designed to be linear.

This ensures that each player spends time in each spirit realm to meet the key players, ideologies, and motifs of each zone. Along the way, players unlock special covenant abilities – one global, one keyed to class – from each area. At level cap, players are presented with a difficult choice about which covenant to side with, determining what special abilities they gain permanently, their endgame progression path, and rewards. These include cosmetics like pets and awesome looking "back slot" cape tweaks, upgradable mounts, armor transmogs, and more. (We'll dive more into the four covenants and their special abilities later.)

The choice also provides access to a sanctum where you can hang out with other members of your covenant, similar to the concept of class halls. You can't pick the Maw as your covenant, so you have four choices to select from. But beware: your choice will be difficult to switch if you side with someone you don't like. The design team played with the idea of making the choice permanent, but ultimately decided that you could swap, but at a hefty price. The gravity of your choice has been likened to the Aldor/Scryer reputation grinds that were in The Burning Crusade – you can change, but it's not going to be easy or fun. Instead, you're encouraged to go all in on your covenant choice and stick with it.





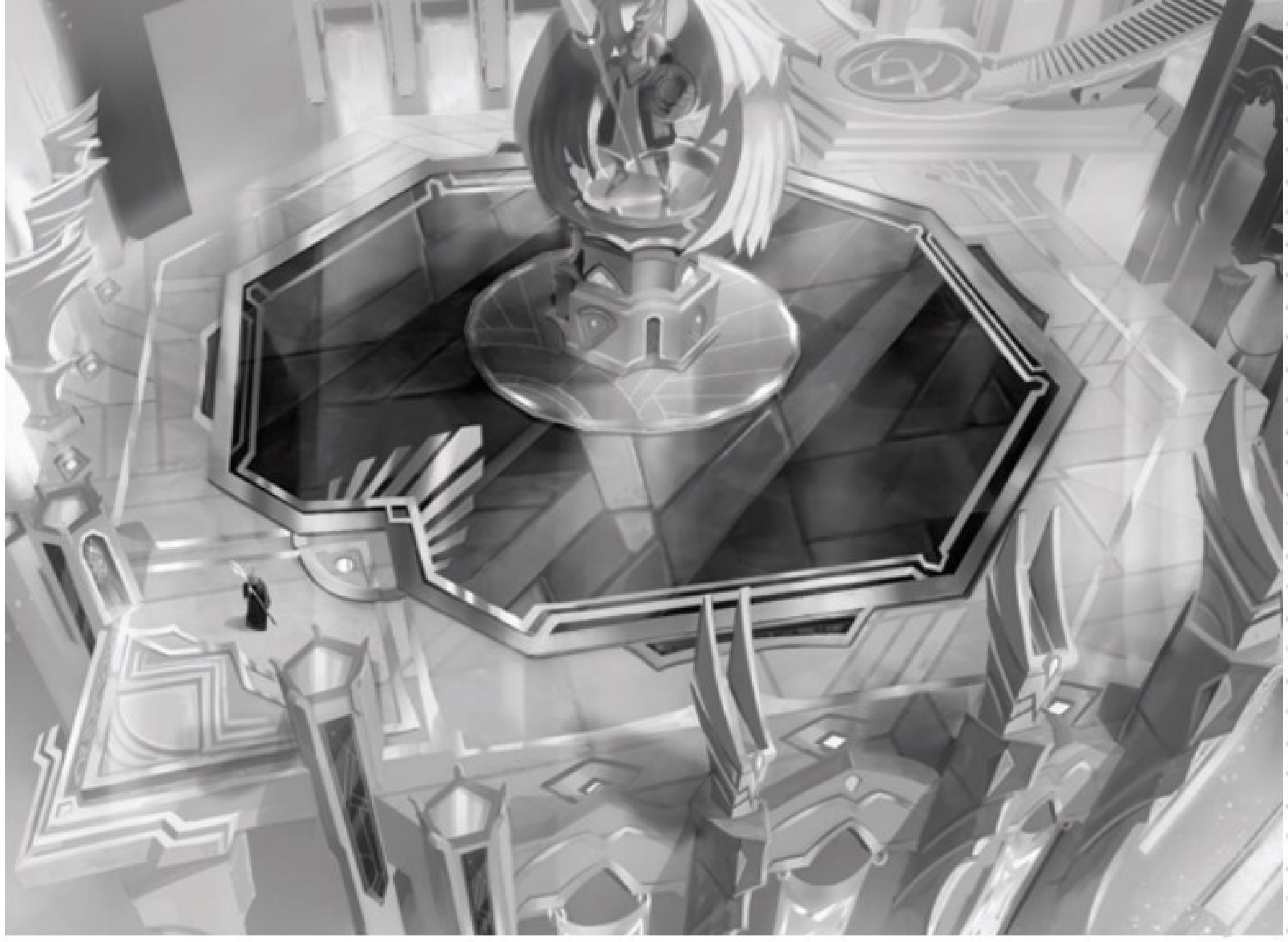
"So our goal there is making, from a systems and power perspective, each covenant a large package of things." says game director Ion Hazzikostas. "There's a couple of active abilities, but also dozens of traits that you'll have access to through the Soulbind system. We've learned over the years that you can make a single talent row, and there's three choices in this row, someone is going to math which is best. But when you actually ask the question of like, is a mage better than a warlock? Actually, it depends on a whole lot of things, including your personal preference, and you want both, and so we think, when things are abstracted to the level of an array of options, we have enough tuning knobs to get to a point where there will be situational preferences; it won't be super clear cut."

Outside of cosmetics, one of the critical aspects tied to covenants is Soulbinds. Within the Shadowlands, entities can bind their souls to one another. Thematically, maybe they're friends, battle buddies, or lovers. Choosing these binds with colorful characters offers both flavor and functionality to your kit as you advance such as learning the ability to parry from a fencer or gaining arrogance from a haughty aristocrat to punish enemies with lower health. While bound to these characters, they don't follow you in the world, but simply provide what amounts to a talent tree that you can move around as needed. Soulbinds provide the kind of endgame progression and advancement that has been previously explored with artifacts and artifact power.

"I would say an equal if not larger number of total traits, but with more choice and horizontal progression," Hazzikostas says. "The artifact was effectively linear progression. Maybe some are early choices, but at the end of the day, everyone's Ashbringer four months in was the same as everyone else's Ashbringer and your goal is just to complete yours and fully unlock its power. And so, a lot more options, a lot more active choice and customization, but unlike something like Azerite armor, a sense of permanence. There's no re-earning or re-unlocking anything as you go."

You can have multiple souls in your Soulbind stable, each with their own talent trees and unlocks, and swap between them as needed to tackle various challenges.

The Necrolords rule over Maldraxxus



NEW LIFE, NEW SKILLS

I get a chance to get some hands-on in the afterlife, entering the Shadowlands where all players will in the first realm they get to explore, Bastion. The Kyrians that inhabit this zone are angelic entities, honed from eons of introspection, meditation, and service. Soft tones and ambrosia dot the landscape filled with residents all pursuing disciplined improvement and perfection.

Everyone I meet in the Shadowlands thinks I'm dead, and they're very happy to see me. Not only do they assume that I've been selected on a road to become a Kyrian angel because I've been really awesome in life, but no souls have shown up in a very, very long time, thanks to the Jailer's meddling. My introductory quest chains throughout this zone are typical World of Warcraft fare, but the environments and subject matter do a lot toward selling the fantasy that this journey is going to be decidedly different than the rest. One of the first things I do is take on some of the events of my past life, with the encounter throwing enemies at me based on my character's exalted reputation history. While there are plenty of encounters the system can draw from for all characters, including ones for newer players that may not have a huge history of achievements like a fairly generic horde vs alliance segment, it's a nice touch to see various memories come back to show off some of your past accomplishments.

Heading into the zone and punching out quest blocks, I participate in a new take on "starred" monsters and zone events, rooted in the same concepts but with a little more interactivity and variance. From a rewards perspective, these are similar to finding a treasure in Pandaria, but they have a few more bells and whistles from a gameplay perspective. Maybe I do the event once and take on a unicorn-style creature, maybe another time it's a different beast, or maybe there's a little bit more zone exploration or puzzle-solving involved – it's not just picking up a purple bit on the ground as I walk by. I'm rewarded for my efforts with a new toy to play with. Slotting it up on my hotbar, I unleash a pleasant swarm of butterflies. Like most toys, they don't do anything except function as cosmetic punctuation, but they're enjoyable to tinker with.

A few minutes later, I score my class covenant ability for Bastion as part of the story questline. As a mage, the ability is Radiant Spark. The spark has a fairly short cooldown so I can weave it into my core rotations, and it allows for some big damage opportunities. Shooting this spell onto an opponent does damage over time and also makes it so my next few spells do increasing amounts of damage, up to a 100-percent bonus on the fourth spell, so I can time it for a massive knockout blow. This covenant skill is class-specific, so only mages get Radiant Spark; other classes obtain a different covenant skill while siding with Bastion. For some context, let's say I decide later on that I like the mage ability from the Necrolords of Maldraxxus, Plague Bolt, which gives me access to some shadow damage and makes it so that my spells splash shadow damage to nearby targets for a short time. Perhaps I want the Night Fae's channeling point-blank-area-of-effect damage spell that gives me a haste boost. Or maybe, just maybe, I want the Mirrors of Torment ability from the Venthyr of Revendreth so that I can put that on a foe and have them suffer damage and root whenever they attempt to use a skill or ability. These are some of the choices I must make much, much later when I get to level cap. For now, I'm just getting a taste of the first covenant ability that I have access to.

DEATH BECOMES YOU

For another example of how covenant abilities work, let's look at the Death Knight-specific skills that you can obtain from each of the realms. As you can see, they're all loaded with faction flavor while slotting in nicely with standard ability rotations. Damage numbers are subject to change in these skills as they go through testing of course, but you can get a good idea of the core philosophies.

DEATH'S DUE - NIGHT FAE

Instant, 30-yard range, 45-second cooldown

The targeted ground begins to wilt, dealing 14,250 Nature damage over 10 seconds to targets within the area. Drain power from each enemy within the area, reducing their damage done by 10 percent and increasing your strength by 80 for 10 seconds.

SHACKLE THE UNWORTHY - KYRIAN

Instant, 30-yard range, 1-minute cooldown

Admonish your target for their past transgressions, reducing the damage they deal to you by 5 percent and dealing 1,678 Arcane damage over 14 seconds. Shackle the Unworthy's cooldown is reduced by 4 seconds when you damage the affected enemy with a Rune-spending attack.

SWARMING MIST - VENTHYR

Instant, 1-minute cooldown

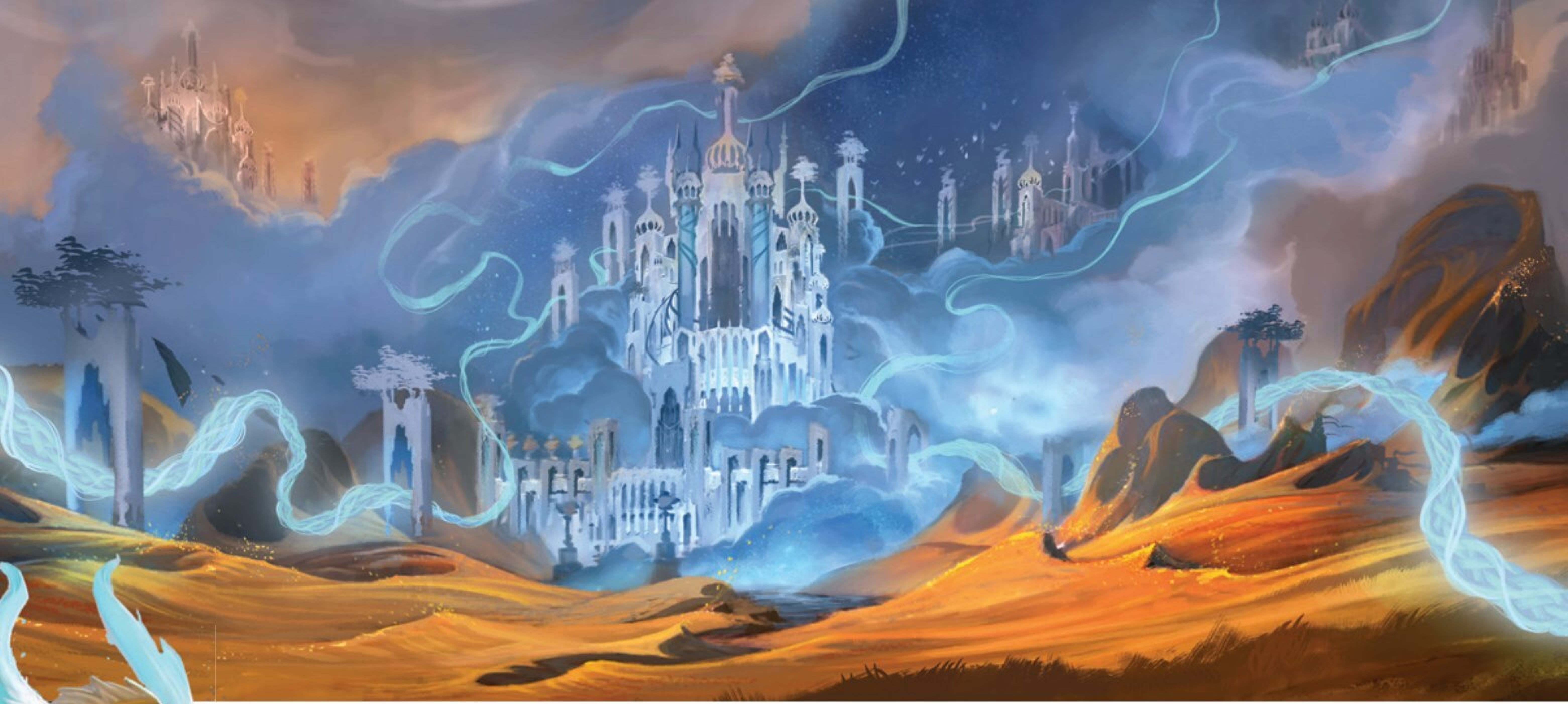
A heavy mist surrounds you for 8 seconds, increasing your Avoidance by 311. Deals 136 Shadow damage every 1 second to enemies within 10 yards. For each enemy damaged, you gain 3 Runic power.

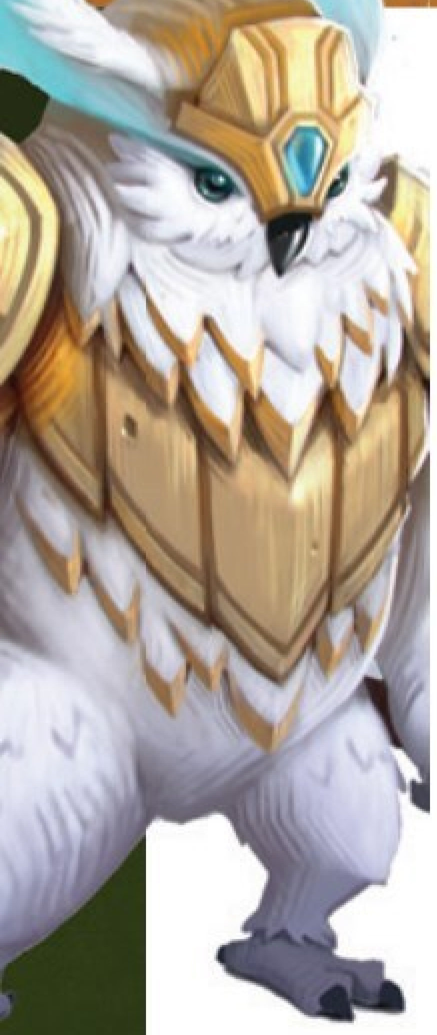
ABOMINATION LIMB - NECROLORD

Instant, 1.5-minute cooldown

Sprout an additional limb for 8 seconds, dealing 4,900 Shadow damage every 2 seconds to the nearest enemy. If the enemy is farther than five yards from you, they are pulled to your location.

As you can see, picking your path is important even at the covenant skill level.





I move throughout the zone, handling a few "quest pockets" designed to be scooped up and easily completed in chunks. I can tell this won't be the faction I side with in the end regardless of whatever skills they convey, as they're a bit too goody-goody for my liking, but the process of putting myself on the path to ascension is more interesting than just slaying random rats. Confronting my past, letting go of things once wrought, and purifying myself as I prepare for greatness is pretty cool, but just a bit too saccharin for my afterlife pursuits in World of Warcraft. A famous figure that players may encounter that identifies with the kind of soul that ends up here is Uther the Lightbringer. Eventually, I score the big covenant ability, one that each character that sides with Bastion receives.

"These abilities are not necessarily combat abilities; you're not usually going to use them to hurt people, but more to solve problems without fighting them," says senior game designer Paul Kubit. "We don't really have a whole lot of options to solve problems in World of Warcraft without fighting them. Usually, we just take our spell book or sword and solve the problem that way. This will give you some other ways to solve those and also give you a way to express yourself in the way of your covenant."

For instance, Bastion covenant allies gain Unburden, which allows a burst forward at an absurd speed – somewhat similar to blink on steroids – with an aggro reduction component to boot. You can use it to cleverly dodge pulls and bypass obstacles. The Night Fae unlock Soulshape, which turns you into an adorable spirit fox (or other unlockable shapes) that enemies ignore and grants you a movement speed boost for 10 seconds. The Necrolords gain Transcend The Flesh, which pulls your soul away from your body and then transports your body to your soul's location later. This one comes with a host of creative applications and will surely lead to players using it to try all kinds of exploration and mishaps with cliff dives and giant pulls. Finally, the Revendreth covenant bestows Door of Shadows, where you choose a location and then, boom, you teleport there. Fairly simple and similar to Reaper's ability from Overwatch.

Next, I tried dying. We've all spent plenty of time dead in World of Warcraft, but my curiosity had to be sated – what if I died in the afterlife? The team is still tinkering with the animations and portrayal, but there's a completely different out-of-body death effect unlike what players have become used to in Azeroth. "Dying in the Shadowlands is more about the anima that binds you together being dissipated then reconstituting when you return to your corpse," says Hazzikostas. "Ultimately the game mechanics need to work as they need to work but the way death feels is going to be meaningfully different. Because when you die in Azeroth you're seeing a glimpse of the veil starting to weaken, and that is a peek into the Shadowlands and why you can see the spirit healers that are guiding you back. They are not there in the Shadowlands [death experience]."

My time with Bastion and the Kyrians ended there, but that was just the beginning of what Shadowlands has to offer. Players making their way to the Shadowlands normally from Azeroth will do so from Icecrown Citadel, where they have access to Oribos. Oribos is a central hub for both Horde and Alliance in the afterlife, so expect it to be similar in that respect to Dalaran or Shattrath City. My journey next took me to the final of the main four zones you visit along the leveling process, the castle of Revendreth and its vampiric Venthyr masters. While I didn't get to play it, I did get to see it – and it's pretty much the coolest zone I've seen in World of Warcraft. Ever.

KEEPING IT CLASSY

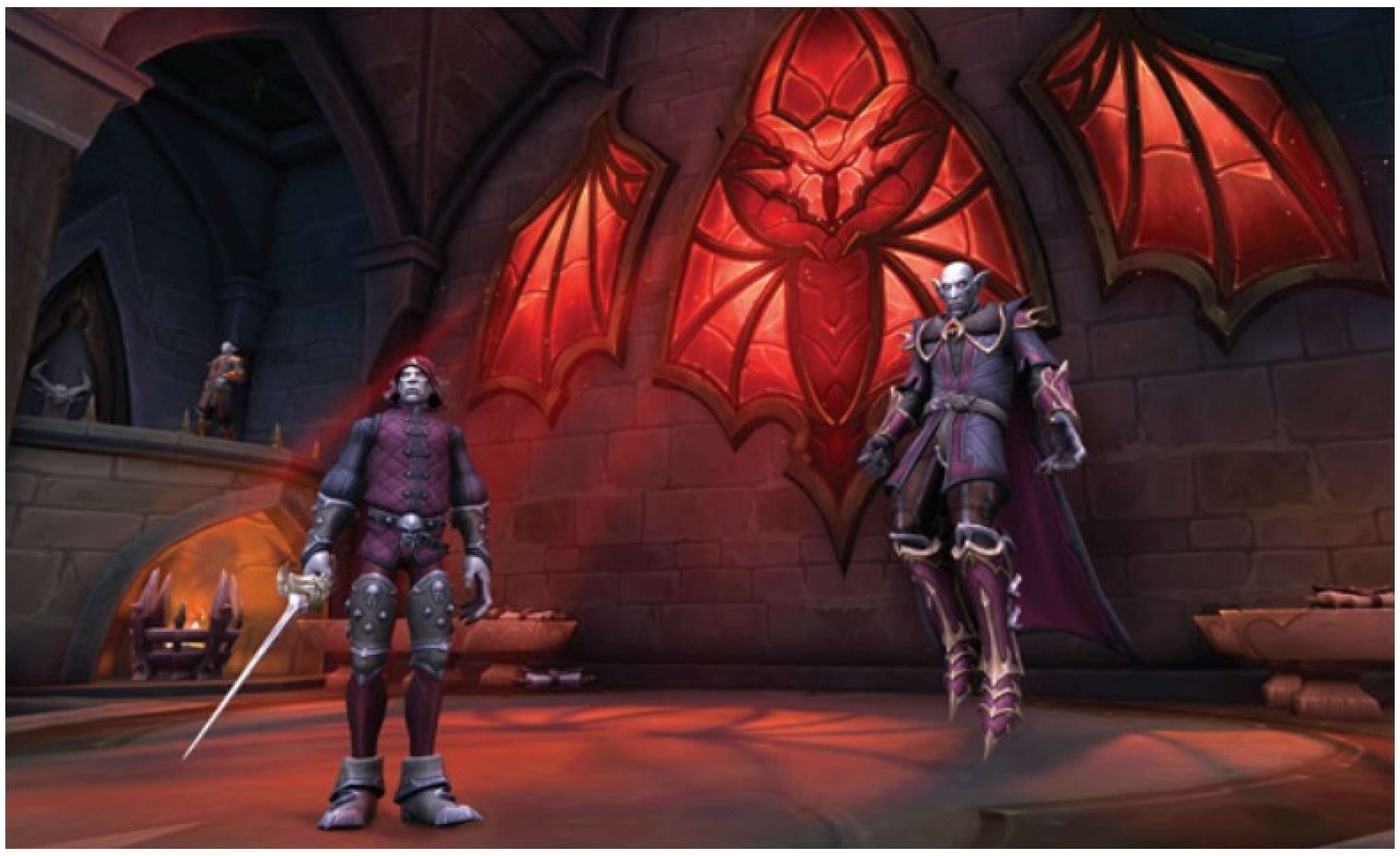
In Shadowlands, alongside a number of tweaks and changes to existing classes, the design philosophy is shifting to be more about the class and less about the spec. If you've played WoW over the course of the last decade, you may have noticed a serious shift toward each of the classes' three specializations being completely unrecognizable from one another, essentially the subclasses becoming classes unto themselves.

Players retain core abilities they previously lost as they transitioned into specialized subclasses as they level as well, things like fireball and frostbolt are still available for arcane mages, Shamans have their complete ensemble of totems to fling around, and your beast mastery hunter can pop off an aimed shot if you feel like it. Players will also get their "fun" flavor buttons back like Eyes of the Beast and other effects that basically just took up bar space with skills that really didn't have much bearing on the "real" game. While these changes probably won't alter your current core rotations for any given class or subclass in the endgame, they may give you some more utility options for certain scenarios and situations.

A TERRIFYING TOUR OF TRANSYLVANIA

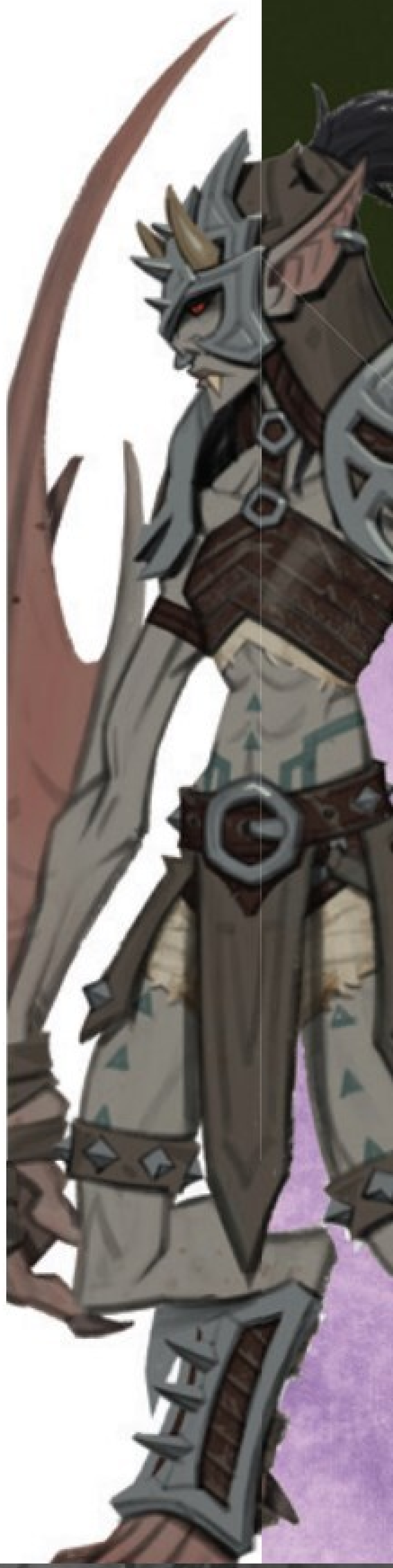
For this zone, the team was trying to tackle the question of: “What would WoW Translyvania look like?” It takes the form of a gigantic gothic castle sprawling over a misty forest and a curious pit. Carriages, floating vampiric aristocracy, gargoyles, and little Igor-style gravedigger minions called dredgers mill about. The zone is colossal, so my guided tour through the realm of sinners – who can still be redeemed in some form – took me through each of the castle’s five wards.

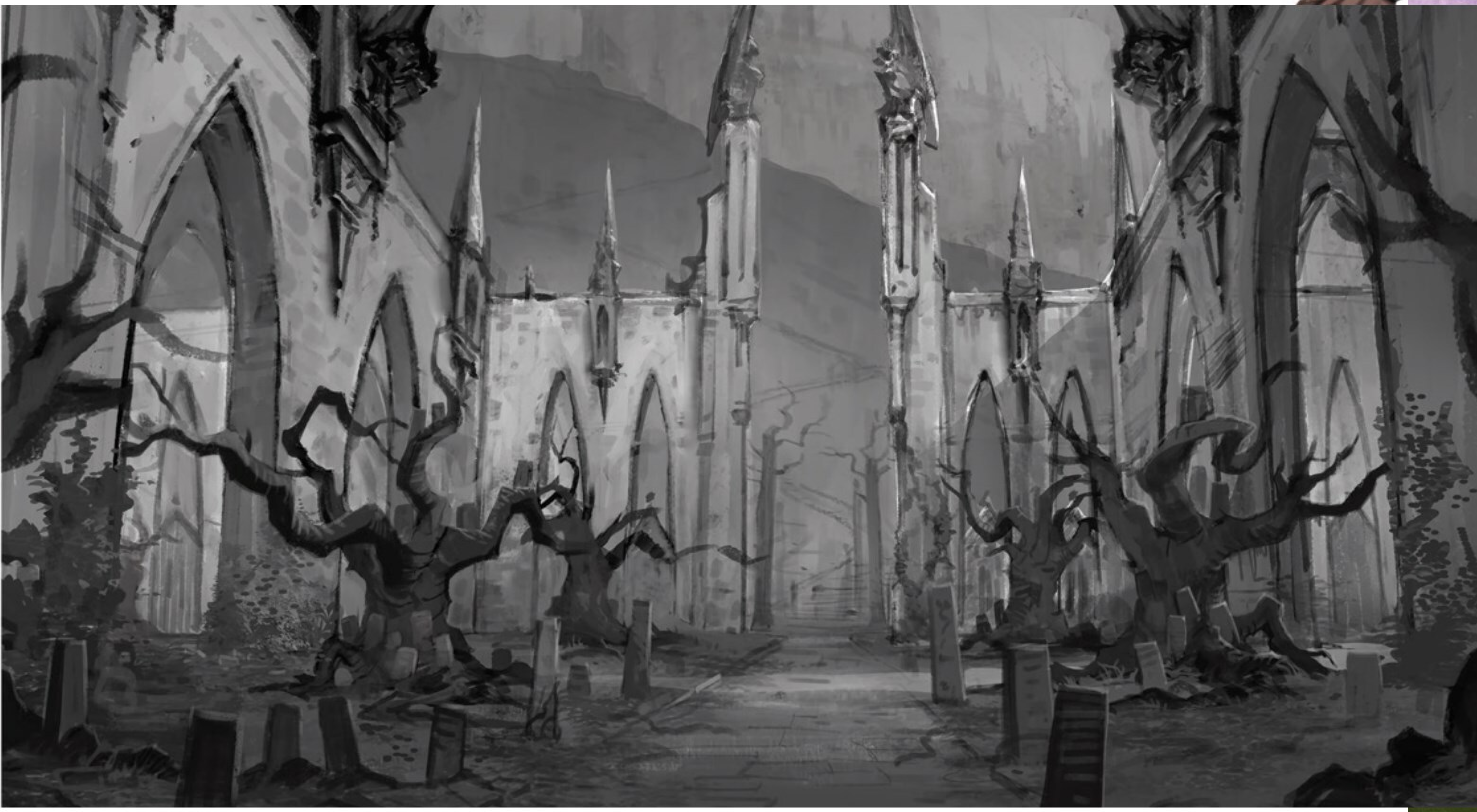
The entryway itself is suffering disrepair, as are the buildings and structures across the castle grounds. This is a problem that many of the Shadowlands zones have, as there are no new souls coming in due to everyone being routed to the Maw. The castle proper looms over the zone like an oppressive titan, towering over the Village Ward where players enter and can get the lay of the land. Sin stones, gravestones with the soul’s crimes listed upon it, litter each pathway. Souls sent here can etch these sins off their stones over time as they prepare for the afterlife, but the Venthyr’s methods are often horrific and torturous. While the Venthyr may have an important purpose in the Shadowlands, with their task of preparing tainted souls for the afterlife, you can’t help but think these vampiric, bickering aristocrats have a serious streak of sadism.



The souls that show up here under normal circumstances are “bad guys,” prideful, and perhaps having justified terrible things, and have a chance at redemption over eons of suffering in the Shadowlands. A famous character from Warcraft that ended up here is Kael’thas Sunstrider. Carriages are a frequent sight throughout the castle grounds, and beyond being a cool aesthetic addition, players can hop on and off at will to help speed up travel or get through pockets of aggressive enemies. The Village Ward is mostly exterior environments, various dilapidated buildings, and a view of the fog-filled forest where the Venthyr schedule hunts on tortured souls, sending them out with a false sense of security and hope to run away, then track them down and “humble” them.

The next stop on the carriage-ride is the Cathedral Ward. It’s a mix of interior and exterior space, and significantly higher class than the village below. One of the major dungeons of the expansion, Revendreth Cathedral, is located here. Elevators are scattered everywhere, allowing players to move from ward to ward and explore the vertical space of the zone. Along the way in this area, we spot someone who looks decidedly out of place, a sort of Ethereal-looking merchant that’s part of an organization known as the Brokers.





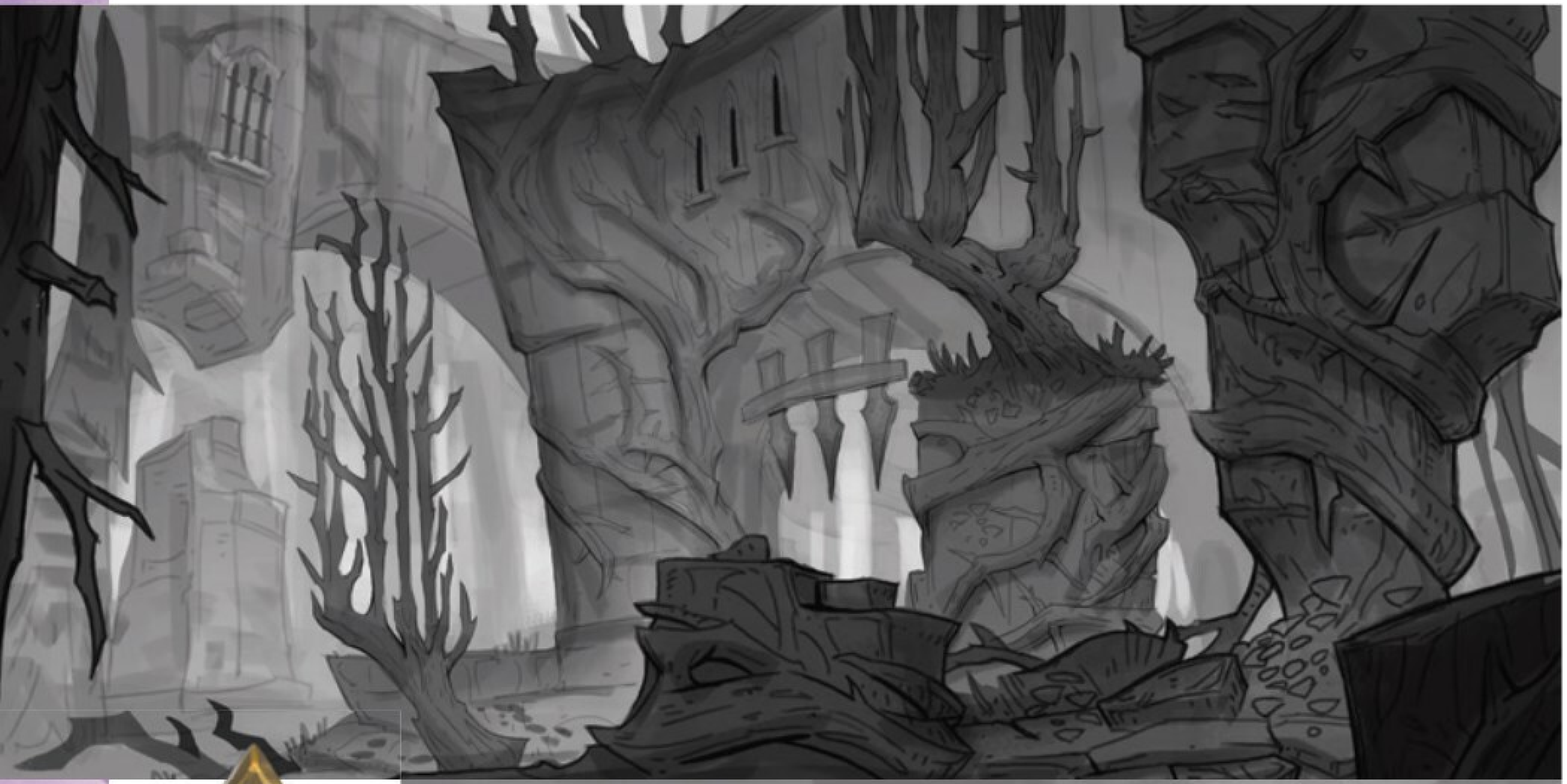
The Brokers are a faction separate from the Covenants and the Maw, sort of soul-traders, that can move freely around the Shadowlands. In the wake of the recent calamities, the Brokers have taken this chance to capitalize on new opportunities for profit and perhaps more. They are similar in appearance to the Ethereal faction from multiple expansions, and the team's comments lead me to believe they'll be just as shady and manipulative over the course of this expansion as our old friends.

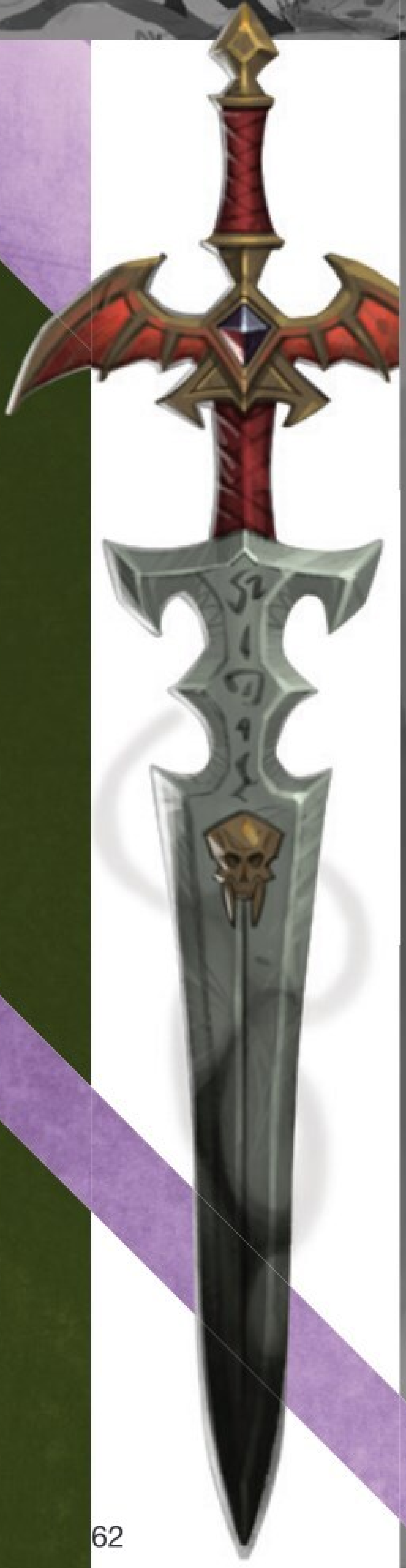
The Ember Ward is a stark contrast to the rest of the space. This is the only spot in Revendreth where the light has actually broken through, and hence is the worst nightmare for our light-vulnerable friends. This area is completely destroyed, and the unfortunate Venthyr that have been sent here as punishment are either dead, driven insane by the light, or battling each other for the scant pockets of shadow that dot the ward. The ruling class of Venthyr can't torture each other like they would other souls, but they have the Ember Ward to handle dissidents and rabblerousers. Outside of being burned to death by the light, the exposure also slowly turns Venthyr insane. This isn't a fun place, but it's thematically awesome – the Venthyr have even turned their torturous pursuits to utilizing mirrors as weapons with the stray light.

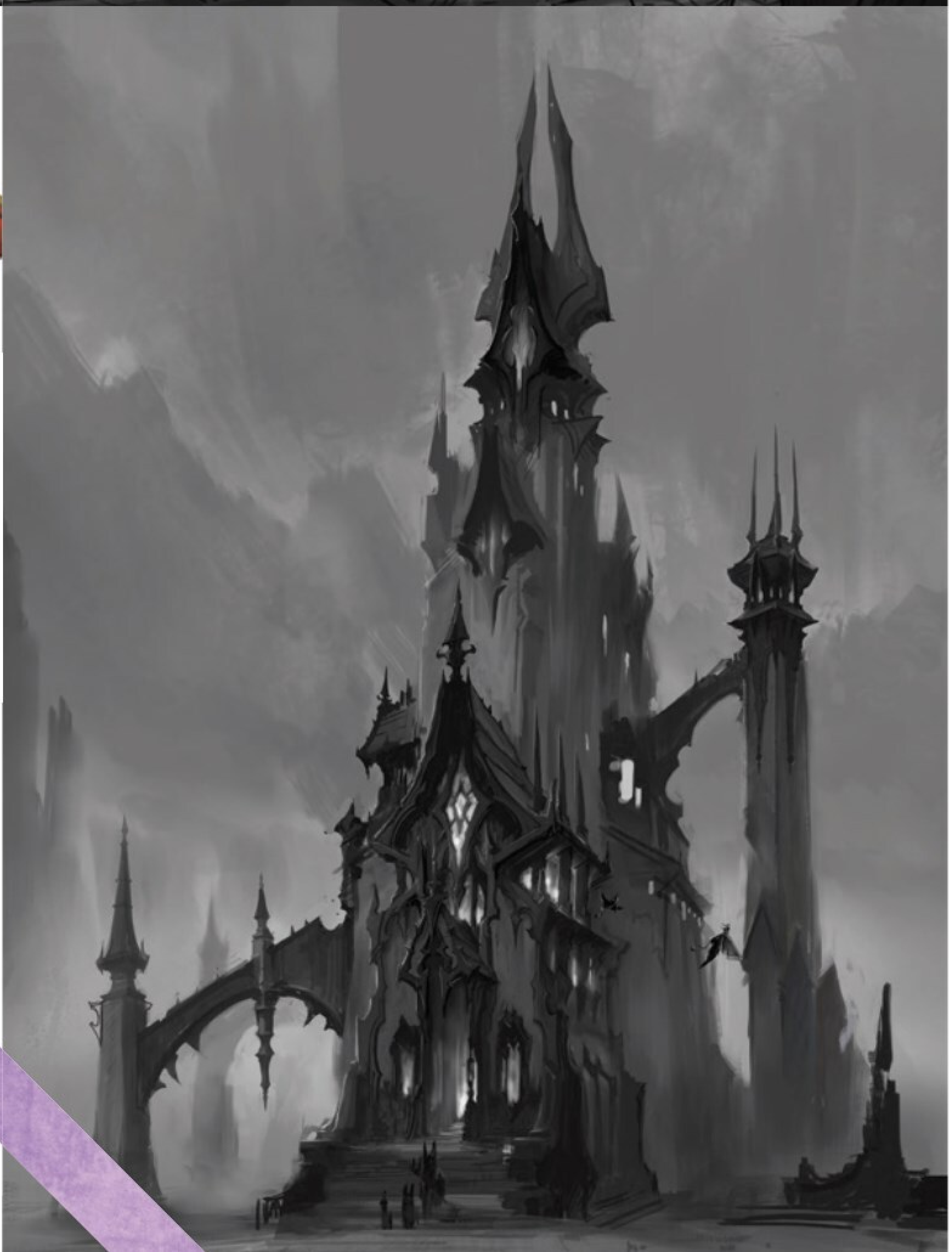
The Venthyr's massive gargoyle army is housed in the Military Ward, but this area and the gargoyle forces are both in disrepair due to the soul drought. We spot a dredger being created out of a giant pit here – they're just made from muck. The dredgers keep attempting to rebuild and keep the wards active, but it's a battle they're losing. The Military Ward is an endgame centric area featuring catacombs, hostile enemies, and cool animated weapons and items that the Venthyr have shoved souls into.

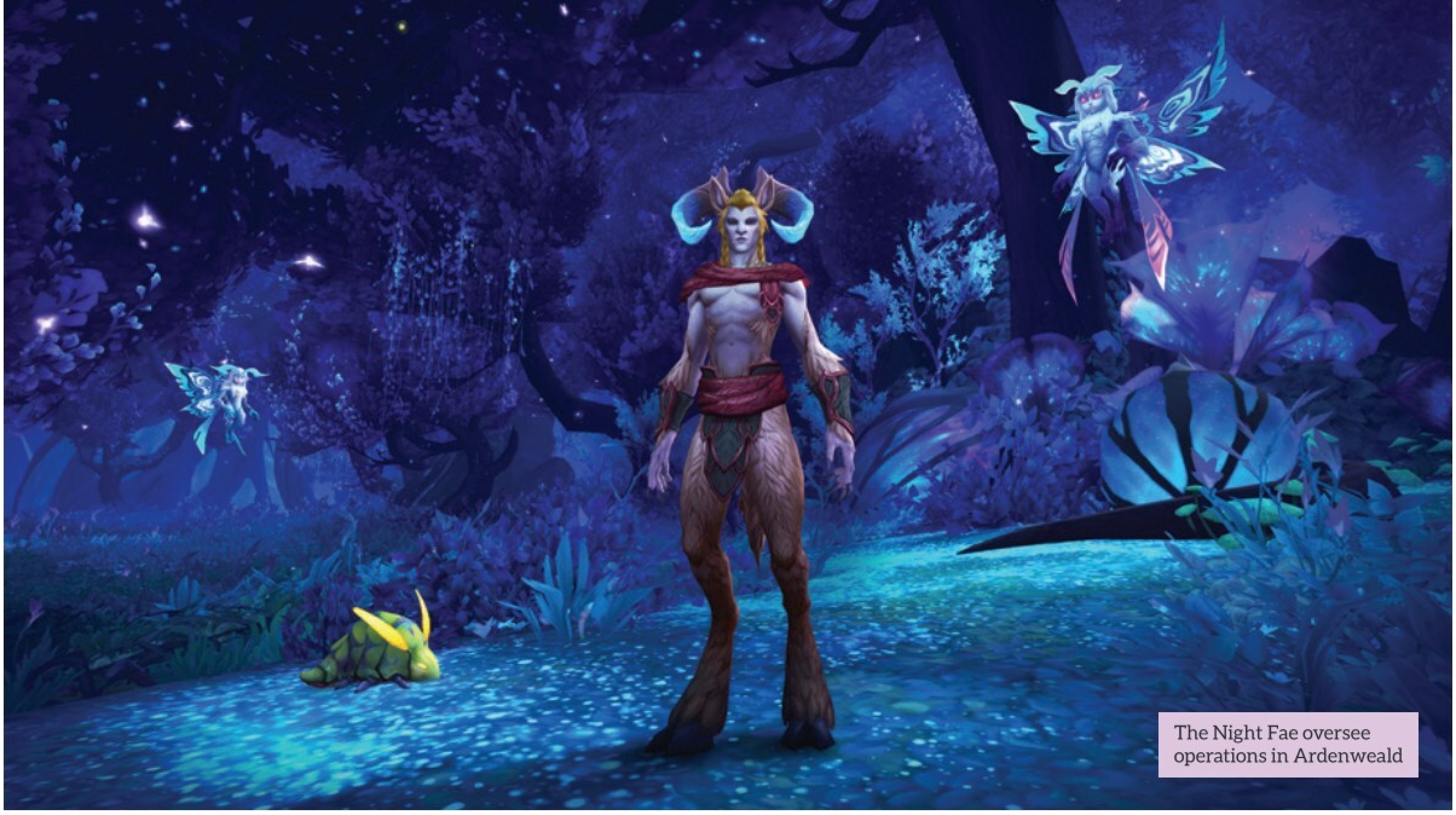
A quick jaunt around the Castle Ward highlights multiple points of interest. Various districts make up the Castle Ward, designed for those who curry favor with the countess, a place for old money, dark favors, decadent delights and grisly parties. This is also the first chance I get to look at the area below the castle, a spooky place known as Endmire. Endmire is where creatures end up that have moved from realm to realm in the Shadowlands, twisted and misshapen as a result of the anima ending up in the wrong place. The stuff down here isn't necessarily the creepy Bloodborne-vibe of the parapets above, instead it's a different blend of strange, an unnerving warped reality composed of creatures that defy sense and explanation, with a wide assortment of aberrations and colors flitting about in an unchecked bog. Under normal circumstances, the gargoyles would keep these manifestations under control, but now they're simply tossing these creatures down here instead of dealing with them up above. Creatures with two heads. Creatures with no heads. Energy spiders. The denizens down there are super weird, and kind of awesome, like a *Princess Mononoke/ Spirited Away* bestiary gone wrong.

My tour of Revendreth left me a bit awestruck. It's rare that I can't wait to actually get in and begin what will inevitably just be distilled down to grabbing a bunch of quests and doing them in the most efficient manner to level up, but I'm more excited for the prospect of what happens after. Once players complete their trial period in each of the four core realms, they're given a choice at level cap that starts a post-level campaign, full of quests and adventures that players selecting the other options won't get to do. These choices flesh out the zones and cultures even more, while bringing the player into the fold of that covenant and their particular challenges and stories. It's difficult to say right now, but I think Revendreth has a good shot at ousting Karazhan as my favorite WoW environment of all time.








The Night Fae oversee operations in Ardenweald

POWER AND NATURE

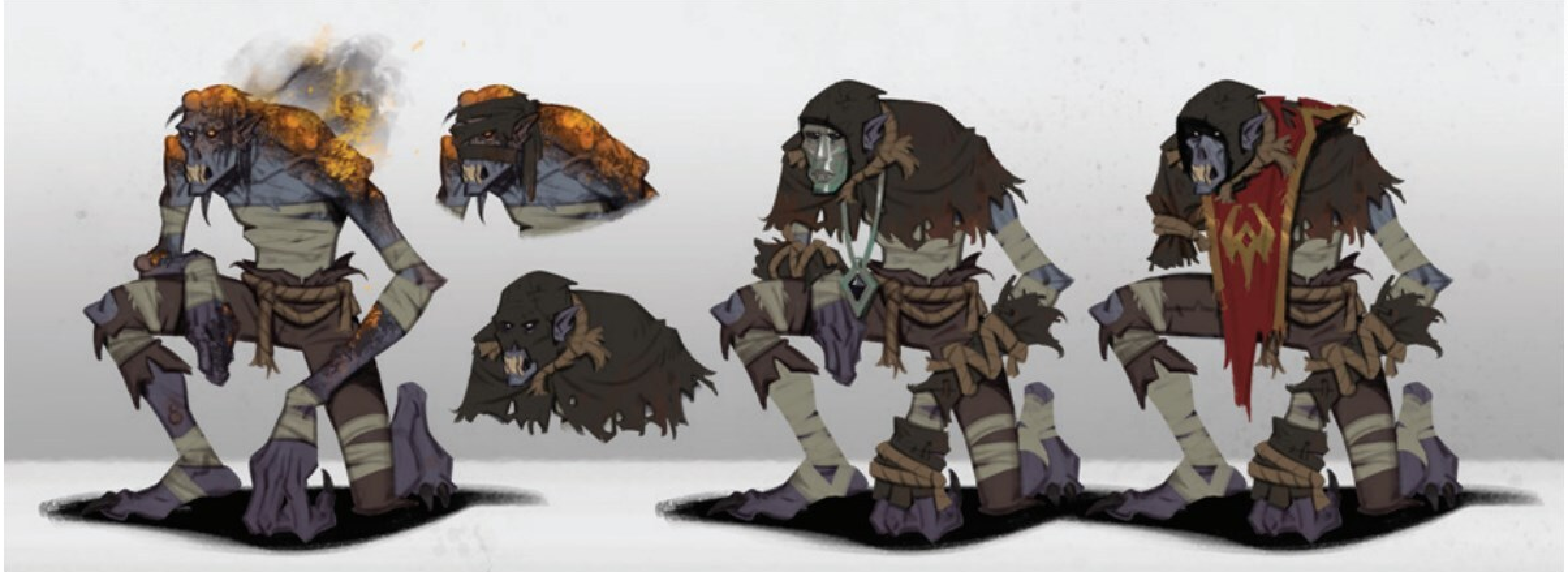
I didn't tour or play in the other two core covenant areas, but I can't wait to explore them. The Maldraxxus covenant and its associated Necrolords house a realm of the pure Scourge. These are essentially "Scourge-unchained." The Scourge we're used to seeing in Azeroth, from ghoul to abomination, generally serve the Lich King or other associated necrotic masters. These Scourge embrace chaos believing in a "might makes right" ideology where the strong survive and the weak are crushed underfoot. The zone is filled with traditional Scourge architecture like ziggurats and creations you would expect to see in various undead-centric existing WoW environments, but it all has its own special proto-slant. An example of one of the high-profile spirits that have made their way here is Draka, Durotan's mate. Players who side up with the Necrolords will have access to all kinds of corpse-y creativity, including the ability to build their very own abomination to take with them in certain areas of Maldraxxus.

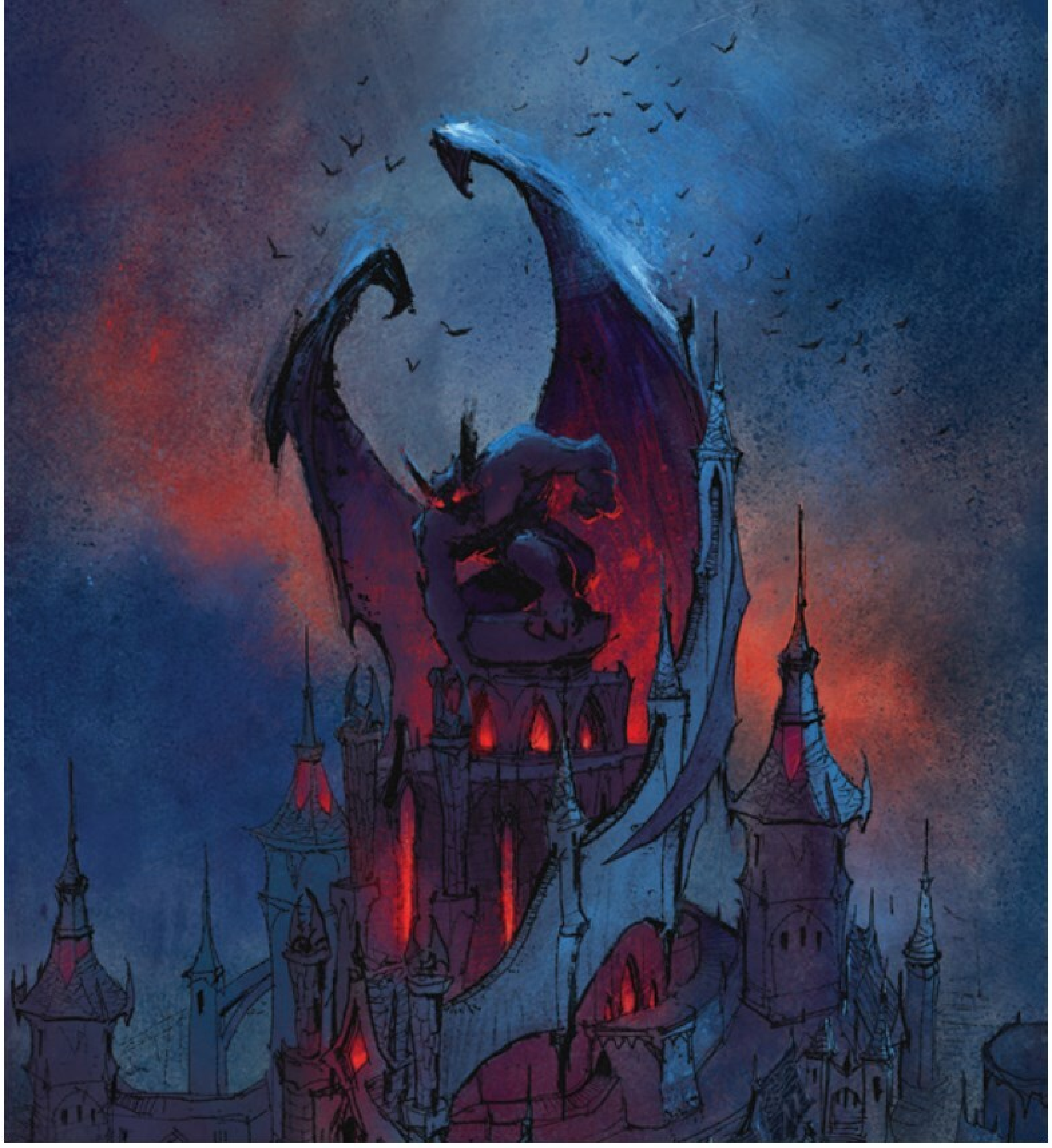
The final covenant area that players can ally up with is Ardenweald and the Night Fae that inhabit it. If you're familiar with the sort of nature aspects that are prevalent in say, the druid class and the Emerald Dream, that's a good starting point for understanding what's happening in this zone. These are keepers of the life cycle but on the death side, with more of am autumnal or winter take rather than the spring or summer vibes typically associated with druidic lore in the WoW universe. An example of a high-profile character from the universe that players may expect to see here would be Ursoc.

MAKING LEVELS MATTER

With the "level squish" back down to a cap of 60, players gain relevant abilities and skills every level, whether that's new class abilities, mounting, or talents. Along with this, there are a few major new additions that are important for new players and alts. New players can level from 1-10 in a completely new zone, a faction-oriented fantasy that sets them up for their new adventures in Battle for Azeroth from levels 10-50 (and then into Shadowlands for the 50-60 experience). The idea here is that players will always advance through the latest expansion before heading into current content to ensure that they're caught up on the story. However, if you've already got a max level character and are working on an alt, Blizzard is embracing old content and scaling.

At level 10, you can talk to Chromie (A major dragon that's focused on time travel) and choose to have your 10-50 leveling experience in any of WoW's major expansions. Everything is scaled to make it so that your journey through say The Burning Crusade would take about as long as Mists of Pandaria, and you basically get an entire expansion worth of content before moving on to Shadowlands. For players that still want to level through dungeon grinding or spamming, this won't interfere – it's all about giving players new options, not taking away old ones.





HELL ITSELF

Now our journey takes us to a zone in the Shadowlands that players can't side with, an endgame-only zone that houses the worst of the worst souls in history, pure evil beings that cannot be redeemed. Normally, no one can enter and leave the Maw, but the players have been designated as "Maw Walkers," something we'll learn more about later. This is the home of the mysterious Jailer entity that players will learn more about as we progress through the expansion's timeline. For now, this is an environment full of endgame activities sort of like the Timeless Isles, but there's a twist – it's actually dangerous. Really, really dangerous.

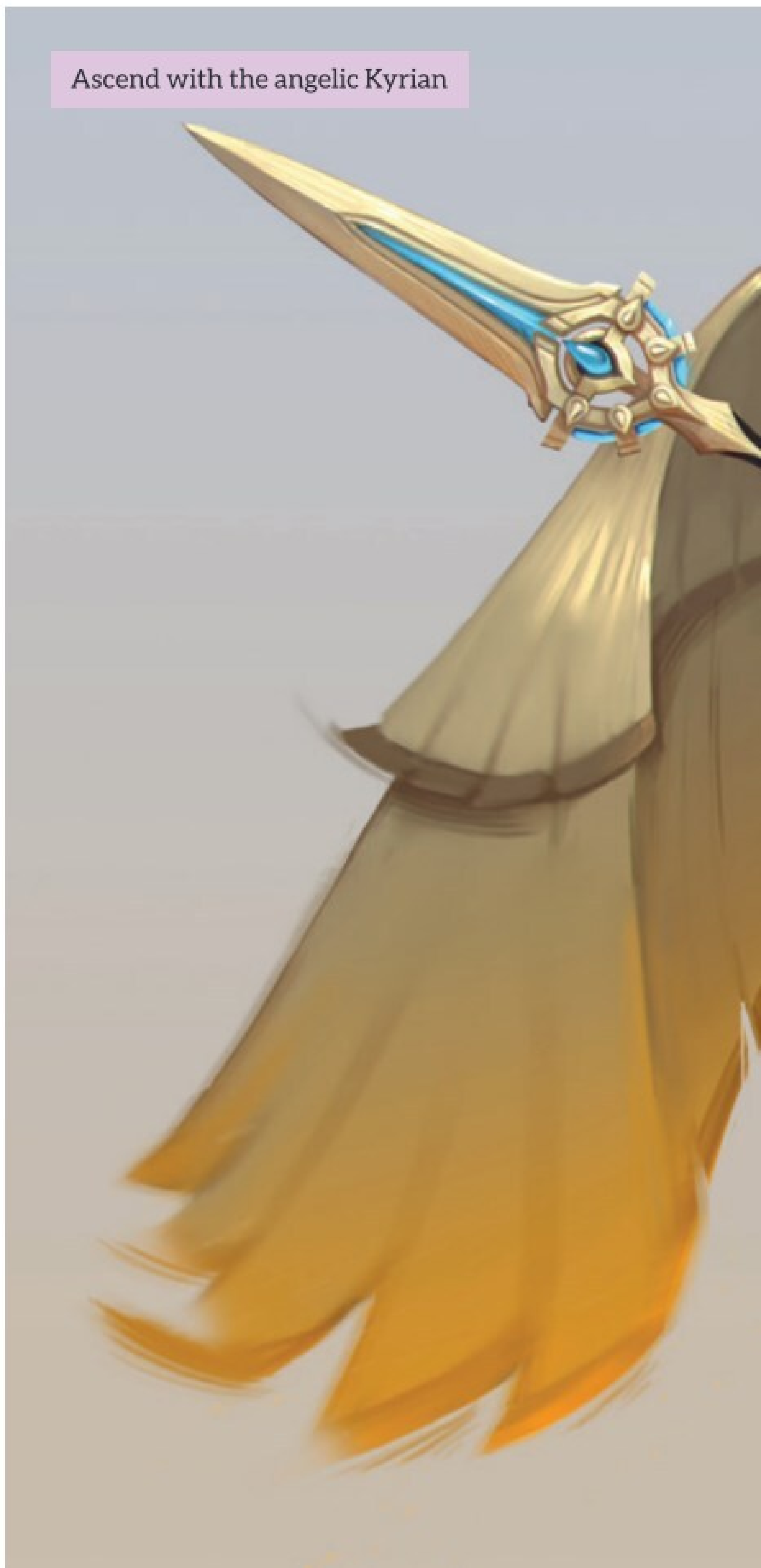
You won't find any quest hubs or friendly NPCs in the Maw. What you might find are elite enemies and environmental hazards looking to kill you around every corner. Let's say they do manage to take you out. No big deal, return to your character and keep going, right? Not so fast. Every time you do anything of consequence in the Maw, you get a warning. The Jailer has noticed you, and that's not a good thing. You're going to incur the Eye of the Jailer mechanic by doing almost anything in the zone, from saving souls, doing World Quests, taking out one of the Jailer's Lieutenants, or even just getting killed. The more you do in The Maw, the more ire you incur, and the more intrusive the punishments get.

With only a little bit of the Jailer's attention, you may attract some shade hounds, which will spot you from far away and chase you all the way across the zone to kill you. Later, perhaps assassination squads – who want to kill you and only you, ignoring everyone else – will come after you. After that, the environment itself may lash out, flinging huge deathballs from above or lashing chains out from the ground. Incur enough of the Jailer's wrath while adventuring in the Maw, and you simply won't be able to survive.

"This is maybe one of the first places that you're going to see some lessons learned from Classic reapplied to WoW, like having something which is a little less convenient can be more fun, or can generate at least more interesting stories," says senior game designer Paul Kubit. "The Maw is a place where we can do things like that."

Inside the Maw, you'll find one of the coolest new places and features inside Shadowlands: The Jailer's Tower. This is a 1-5 person instanced roguelike dungeon crawl that scales to the number of players and doesn't require any particular party composition. This tower is easily my most anticipated feature of the upcoming expansion. There's no group finder, so you can go with friends or challenge the tower alone. Every run is different and gives you new opportunities to get creative and overpowered in all kinds of zany ways. Where most raids and dungeons in WoW need to be carefully balanced, the whole concept of the tower is really about breaking all the rules by gathering and stacking special powerups to handle enemies, traps, bosses and more as you climb the Jailer's Tower. Layouts, treasure locations, and enemies are different every time.

But it's not a time trial; you're incentivized to search everywhere for those special powers and boosts to make your run a success. You're faced with tons of choices as you climb and acquire power, like simple damage increases or health increases. Of course, powers get way more interesting than static percent to existing stats and can be combined and stacked for interesting effects. You could get a skill that gives you a chance to do shadow damage on attacks. Now let's say you find another skill that gives your shadow damage a chance to blind enemies, making the first one way more useful. And that's just the start of things. Skills like Golden Idol let you see which enemies are carrying rewards, so you can pick out targets you may have passed over. This has strategy in group play as well, as only one of you needs to take a skill like this in order to give the entire group its benefit. Kubit details one of his runs where someone in his group took a skill that increased the duration of Unburdened (a Kyrian covenant skill) by 50 percent and another skill that lets his Unburdened instantly kill Maw rats that he passes through. With these two skills and an ability where he can stack up damage on Maw rats and make them explode for huge damage, the team cleaned out several floors like a breeze, dragging the boss out near a pack of rats and then blowing them all up and killing the boss instantly. Of course, then they got to a floor with no rats and that

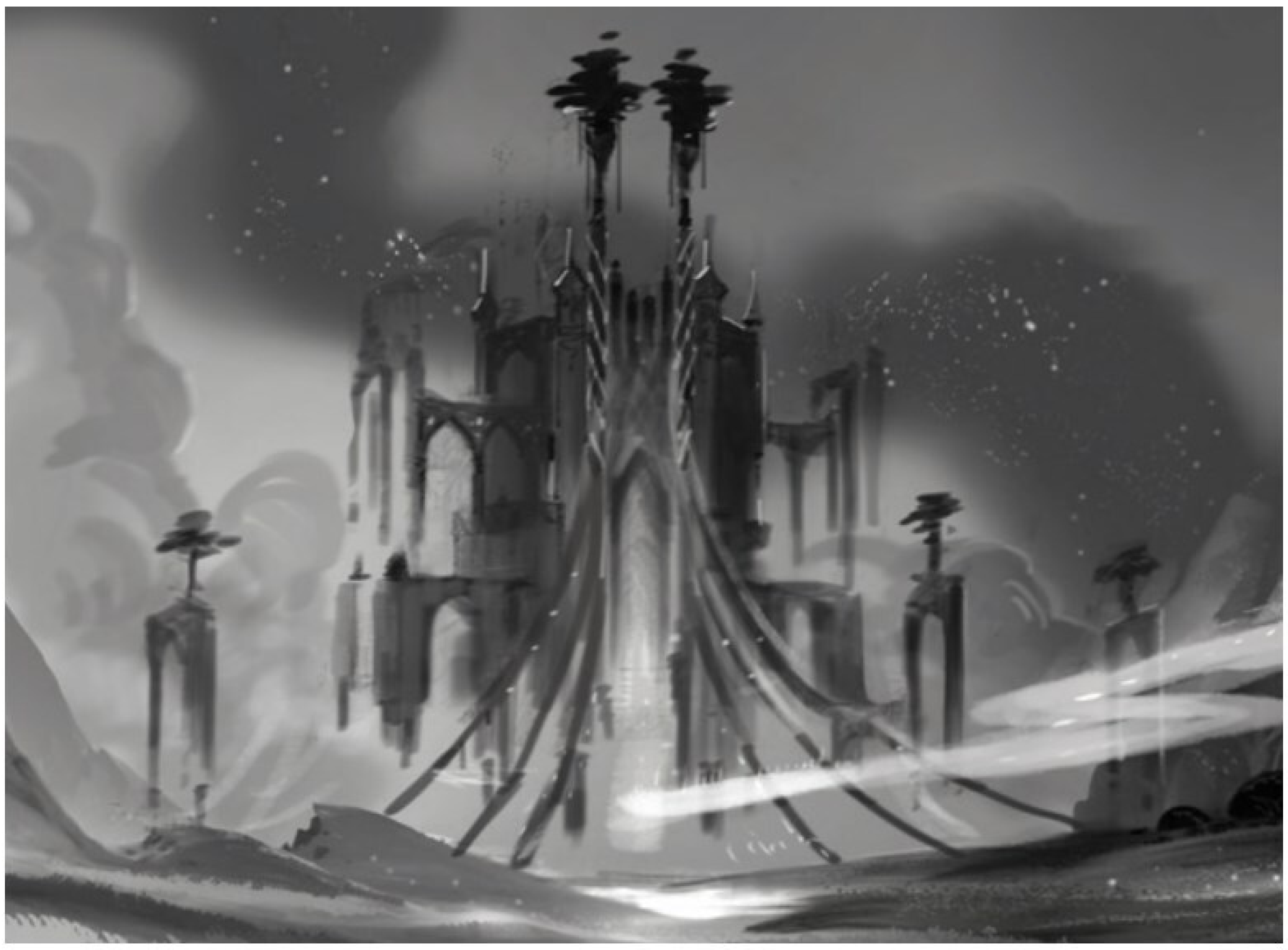

Ascend with the angelic Kyrian

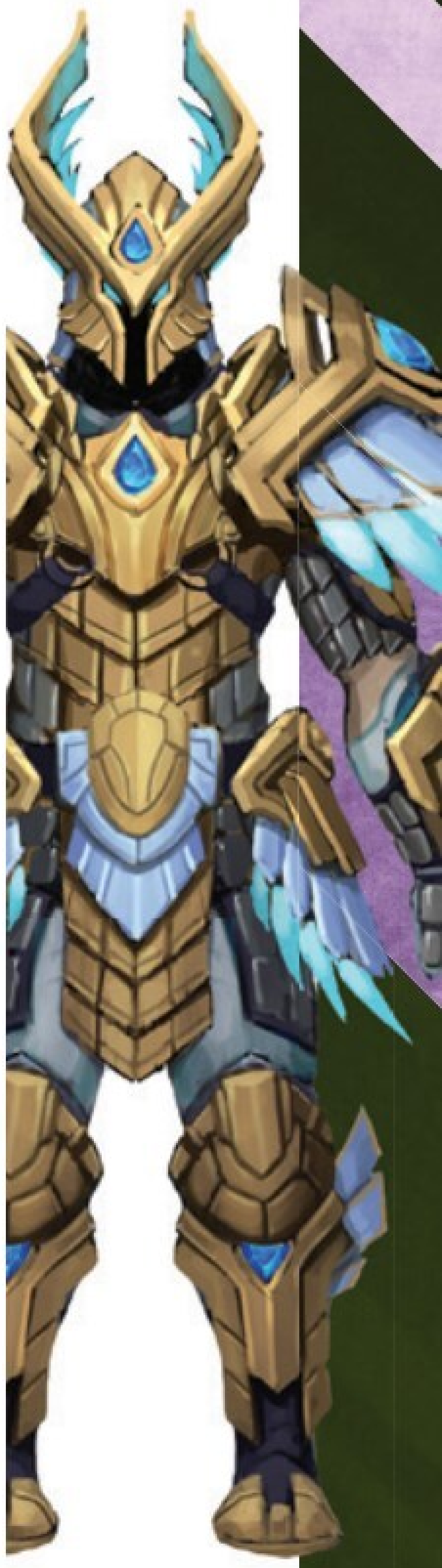
was the end of the run, but that's all part of creative climbing.

Not only does the tower change from run to run, it's also going to change over time to keep things fresh. Events that happen on a regular timeline will bring new special powers and encounters to the tower. In one event, players will actually gain summoned shade hounds to hone into incredible beasts over the course of a climb.

"There's an interesting dev story here where we've been doing lots of play tests of Jailer's Tower already. And we found that it's fun, it's a lot of fun. But then after a week, if we don't add anything, it gets slightly less fun," Kubit says. "And then in two weeks, if we don't have anything, it gets slightly less fun. And then once we add some new powers and start building the feature out again, we have a lot more fun. There's a lot of value in novelty to a game mode like this. And so, we want to make sure that over time, you consistently have something to look forward to."

So the tower is awesome, right? Guess what, it's also the source of legendary items in Shadowlands. You can find runes in the Tower that you can cobble together to create the legendaries you want, and the higher you go, the more powerful the runes you can find. These won't be random when you create them, so by taking the correct runes and putting them together, you can craft the perfect legendary you're looking for.





MOVING TOWARDS THE LIGHT

The Shadowlands represent untread ground for Blizzard in a number of ways. With all new characters, creatures, and a deep dive into the concept of afterlife on Azeroth, a huge amount of lore is being created and defined for decades to come. A level squish down to level 60 makes every milestone meaningful. A deadly open-world area and roguelike dungeon crawl spice up the endgame with new activities. Covenant choices open up new channels for creativity, expression, and alternate advancement.

WoW is reinventing itself all over again. While this shouldn't be surprising for veterans of the 15-year-old MMORPG, it's always incredible to see sweeping changes and fresh experiences come to what has established itself as the rock of the genre. I'm looking forward to siding with the Venthyr and condemning my enemies to the Ember Ward next year.

For more on World of Warcraft: Shadowlands, visit us all month long at www.gameinformer.com/blizzard

HEARTHSTONE

» PLATFORM
PC • iOS • Android

» STYLE
1 to 8-Player
Online Strategy

» PUBLISHER
Blizzard Entertainment

» DEVELOPER
Blizzard Entertainment

» RELEASE
2019

DRAGONS AND DRAFTING

Looking to the future of **HEARTHSTONE,** *Blizzard taps giant dragons and the auto battler craze to keep the digital card game fresh*

by
DANIEL TACK

As we move into next year, Hearthstone is going big, with a few different offerings for all types of players. The first, a new expansion called Descent of Dragons, is not a huge surprise – you can expect a Hearthstone expansion at every Blizzcon, and that sort of content releases like clockwork. The second, a new mode that taps into the zeitgeist of the auto-battle genre, is known as "Battlegrounds." Hearthstone: Battlegrounds is a whole new way to play, even though many of the cards and characters are intimately familiar to players.

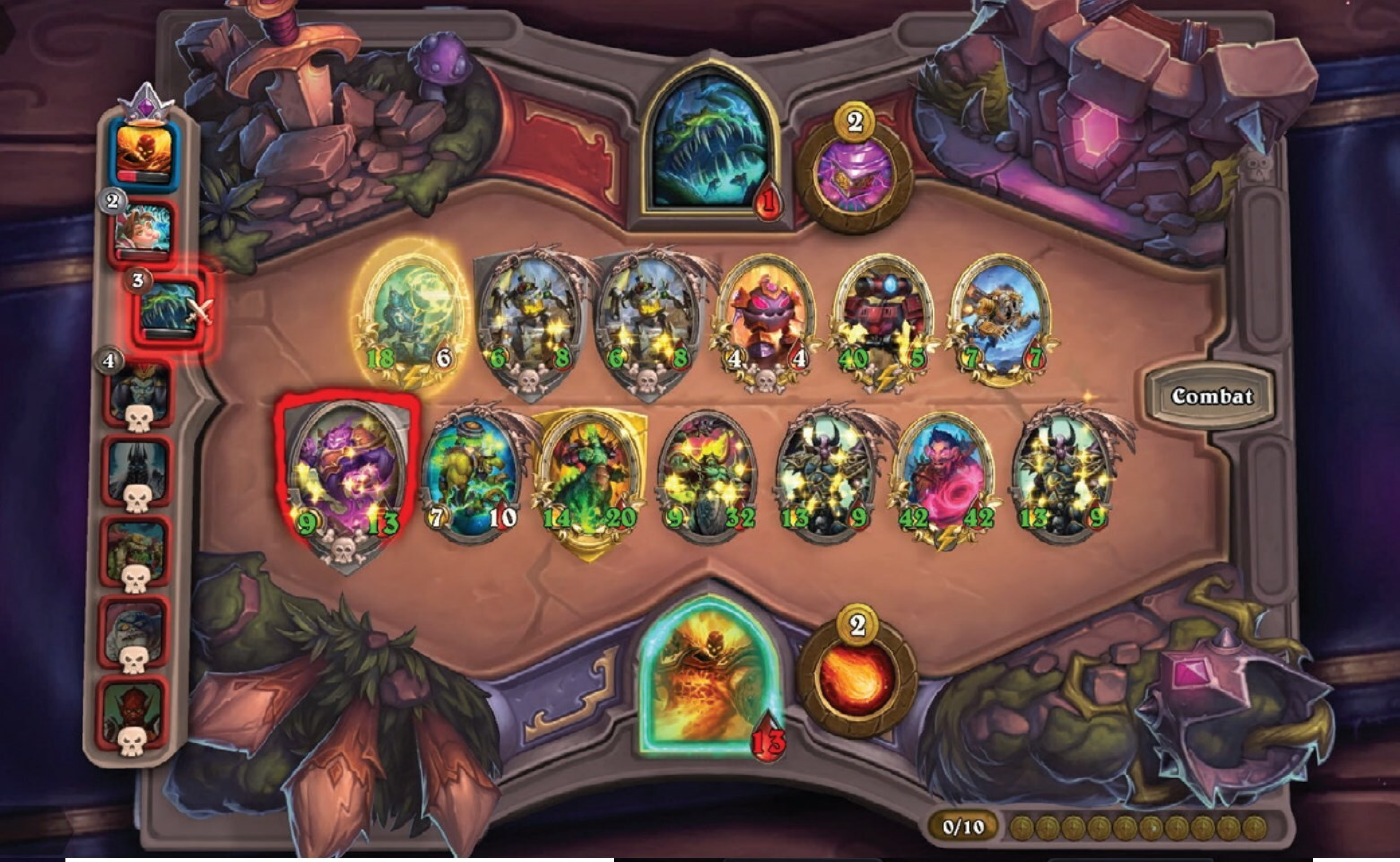
SUMMONING ANCIENT POWER WITH DESCENT OF DRAGONS

With this expansion, players essentially get to pick a side, but no matter your choice, there are a lot of dragons. Will you choose to side with the king of all dragons, Galakrond, canonically the most powerful dragon daddy of them all? Or will you instead join up with many other powerful dragons like Nozdormu, Malygos, or Ysera? That's a decision you must make while deckbuilding, and many of the new abilities and characters sync up with these titanic entities.

A new keyword known as "invoke" appears on tons of minions and cards, but its functionality is different depending on your class. If you're a warlock, invoke gives you imp minions on the table, and if you're a priest, you add a random priest minion to your hand. Invoke appears on tons of cultists, disciples, and spells that fit the theme of readying the playfield for your massive king of all dragons. Five different classes have access to some form of Galakrond, who gets stronger every two times you invoke before you finally play him on the board for a massive game-altering effect. For instance, if you invoke the priest form at his highest level, you'll destroy four enemy minions and equip a 5/2 weapon – a serious shift in power. Galakrond also becomes your hero at that point, which is similar to many of the other hero-replacing effects in the game. The invoke mechanic charges up your Galakrond whether he's in your hand or still resting in your deck, so in some respects, it's like charging up a C'Thun before you drop him on the table for an end-game power play.

Another new mechanic that isn't necessarily related to the dragon motif is sidequests. Unlike the standard deck-defining quests that begin in your hand and come with big goals and big rewards, you can put two of each sidequest in a deck, and they do not start in your opening draw. They're easier to complete than legendary quests, and can be slotted into decks that don't revolve around them, and come with commensurate rewards. For instance, a hunter sidequest tasks you with using your hero power three times and gives you three little Leper Gnomes as a reward. Mages can spend eight mana on spells to summon a 6/6 dragon.

Outside of building your deck around some form of Galakrond, you can chart your path around new forms of big dragons. The paladin's Nozdormu costs only four mana for an 8/8 dragon, and he sets both players to maximum mana, enabling a deck that is ready to drop huge monsters every turn to overwhelm your opponent. The rogue's Waxadred is a wax dragon that shuffles a candle into your deck when it dies, and when you draw it, it shoots right back onto the board. Ysera fills your deck with portals that summon random dragons when you draw them. These legendary dragons generally have a host of class mechanics, cards, and ideologies to facilitate their scaly forms. You can start hunting down your favorite dragons on December 10.



A FUN FREE-FOR-ALL IN THE BATTLEGROUNDS

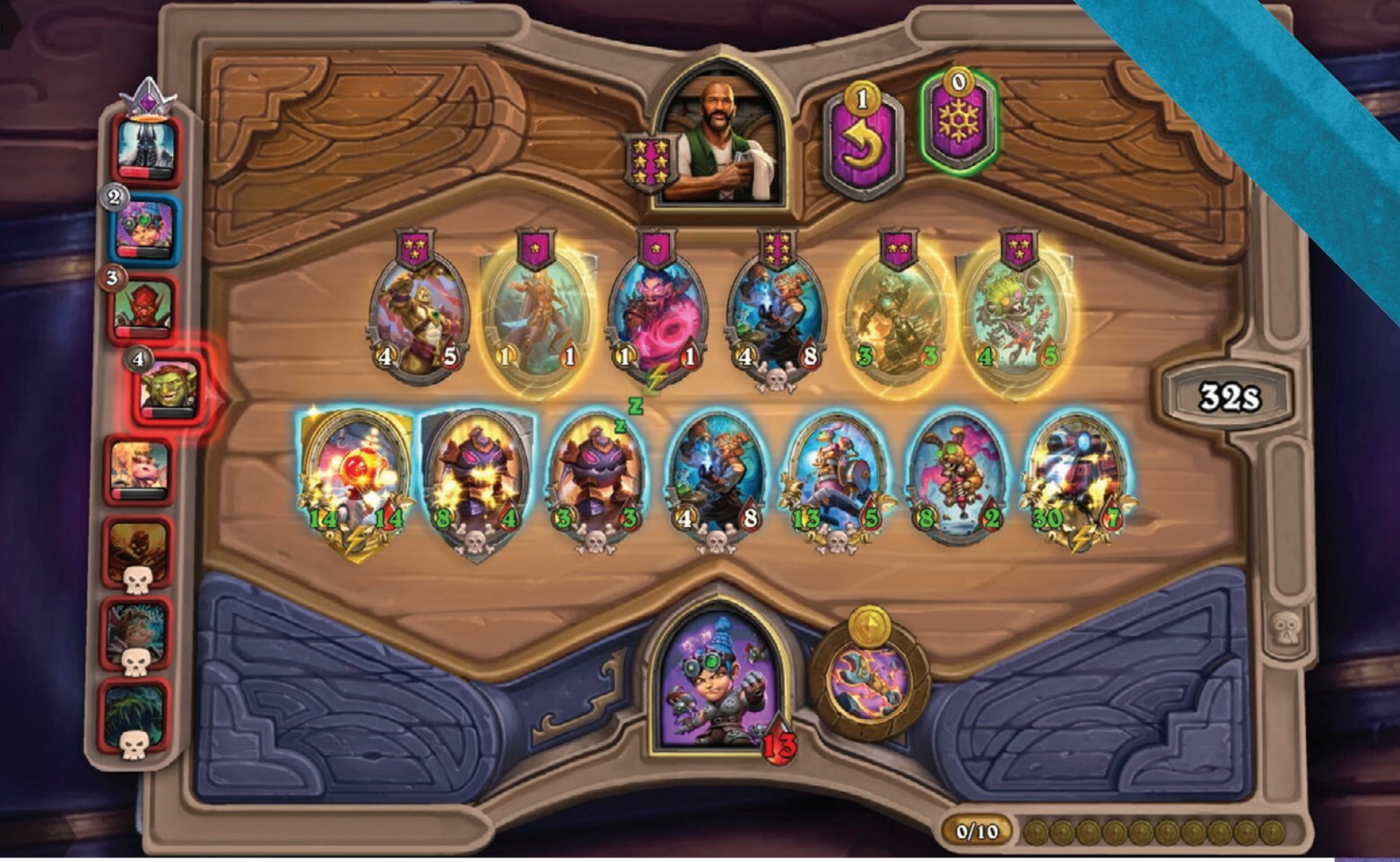
While a new set is cool, I'm far more excited about Blizzard's take on the autobattler. Originally tested as a form of the tavern-brawl event, the Battlegrounds mode expanded exponentially in size and scope. This mode has players taking on seven other players in a winner-take-all form of economic draft. You take on opponents by creating your best possible build from a hero and various minion families. Many auto battlers that exist today focus on building synergies to get bonuses for your whole board, and that's the same line of thinking here – but it's not in the form of inherent "get a bonus at two murlocs, four murlocs, and six murlocs." Instead, you're purchasing minions and creating a board of units to do battle that buff each other up, creating powerful deathrattle strings and summoning powerups. After the "autobattle" you do damage to the enemy hero based on what you have left on the board, rinse and repeat.

If you're familiar with Hearthstone or auto battlers, diving into the mode is exceedingly simple. There are new cards for this mode, but the majority are cards that already exist in the Hearthstone universe. What's fascinating is seeing how cards that you already know play out in different ways here. For instance, let's say you're building a mech-based deck. Junkbot gets bigger every time a mech dies. Easy, right? Well, let's say we put our Junkbot at the very end of the line, with a ton of mechs that make other mechs in front of it and a bunch of deathrattle effects. By the time Junkbot has his turn to fight, he could be 30/30 or even bigger. Depending on how well you've crafted your "front line," he could decimate the entire enemy team by himself. You can only have seven units on the board at any given time, so every one of those slots is precious. Unlike standard Hearthstone, you can readily rearrange the order of your units on the field, and you should spend time carefully consider positioning. There are 81 cards in the Battlegrounds card pool, and around 10 of them are completely new.

Sorassa
WildWolf
BattleOoze
JumpyWiza
Bliztik
BombToss
TheTinkerer
VS
GreatWolf

Many of the features and mechanics from the auto battler genre are here but modified to facilitate a new style of play. You still combine three of a card to make a new one, known as a "golden," which doubles all stats on the card and whatever's in the text box. Doubling the text box can get out of control in a hurry, creating units that can pop out four random minions on a single deathrattle effect or a buffing bear that gives units +10/+10 when they come into play. Unlike other titles in the genre, it's a one-time-only upgrade system; you can't combine three goldens into a tier above that.

Instead of having to preserve income to work up economy like other auto battlers, you're encouraged to spend your resources, as they come back every round plus one (similar to standard mana generation in core Hearthstone). You can still level up your bartender to



raise the chances of higher-tier cards appearing in your pool, but the cost gets reduced every turn you don't do this, making your choice to upgrade far more interesting. Should you push all your early coins into upgrading your pool, be aggressive and wait for the price to drop to almost nothing, or strike a balance while you tech up and decide which faction you want to focus on? You get no bonus for holding on to your precious coins, so spending everything you have effectively each turn is its own strategy to perfect.

A major difference in battlegrounds compared to the current crop of auto battlers is the concept of a hero. Before a game begins, you pick from a pool of up to three heroes. These heroes can push you into certain ways to play or change up your strategy completely. Some heroes are simple, allowing you to pay a coin each turn to buff up a minion or give your beasts a bonus (pushing you toward a beast-oriented template). Others are far more interesting, like A.F. Kay, who causes you to skip your first few turns to get a few powerful minions immediately after your time out or the lich that lets you damage yourself to create a bonus coin each round. There are 24 heroes available in Battlegrounds, with more on the way.

There are obvious synergies to dive into involving the launch set of factions like mechs, beasts, and murlocs, but there's also some fairly complex counterplay available. One of the new cards, a huge assassin-style unit, targets the lowest power enemies on the board when he swings. So if you place him at the start of your lineup, he can strategically eliminate frail "combo" creatures that may cause immense problems like Baron Rivendare or Khadgar.

You can queue up for Battlegrounds with one other player, and there is a full ranked system for you to ladder climb in. Battlegrounds monetization is tied into standard Hearthstone, but it's nothing game-breaking. Players that purchase with money or obtain via in-game gold a certain amount of Descent of Dragons packs will have the first "season pass" that comes with emotes you can fling out during gameplay, stat tracking, and the only functional sort of advantage – you can select from three heroes at the beginning of a game instead of two. Closed beta hits on November 5, with an open beta for everyone beginning on November 12, so by the time you read this, the battlegrounds will be in full swing!

Hearthstone has continually added compelling new modes to reinvigorate the core game, from single-player roguelike dungeon crawls to fun-filled tavern brawls, and these upcoming offerings look to do it again. You can find me in the Battlegrounds trying out new crazy builds with wild heroes next month.

Choose a Mode
Battlegrounds
BETA
Battle against 7 opponents
The Arena
Draft a 30 card deck

The Last Of Us Part II

Revenge served hot

» Platform
PS4

» Style
1-Player Action
(Online TBA)

» Publisher
Sony Interactive
Entertainment

» Developer
Naughty Dog

» Release
May 29

Ellie was born into tragedy. After an outbreak of a mutant Cordyceps fungus ravaged the Earth, the entire human race went into a spiral. Civilizations dwindled to small bands of ragtag survivors forced to kill the fungal monstrosities who used to be their relatives. Ellie knows no other life. And yet, by the end of Naughty Dog's The Last of Us, Ellie joins a haven of survivors where she is given the chance to live something close to a normal life. In The Last of Us Part II, that happiness is ripped from Ellie, and her adversaries will soon discover they crossed the wrong girl.

During a recent two-hour demo, I went hands-on with The Last of Us Part II and explored Ellie's world. Some time has passed since the original game, and Ellie has grown into a capable 19-year-old woman. Unfortunately, the world she inhabits remains as hostile as ever. Encounters are full of nail-biting stealth sequences punctuated by brutal combat. Ellie can now hide in tall grass, but she is never completely hidden, and enemies eventually spot her as they move closer. In the previous entry, players had several opportunities to throw Joel's weight around, but Ellie has a much smaller body frame, so she has to be craftier than her enemies.

"She is a lot smaller than Joel," says co-director Kurt Margenau. "But she's more nimble. We wanted to give the player more options in terms of agility, like with the dodge button, or by squeezing through stuff, going prone under things, and being able to clamber onto things. Those all expand our toolset as designers and help us craft this experience where we offer more verticality in combat. We wanted to expand the breadth of choice that you have, so when you are thrown into this environment where there is an elevated threat, you can deal with it."

The combat encounters in The Last of Us Part II escalate quickly, and a few new enemies are designed to keep Ellie on her toes. Shamblers are a new infected type, and their bodies are covered in bloated pustules. This monster is essentially a tank that absorbs a great deal of pain before hitting the ground. I discovered this after trying to fight off a Shambler with a rusty hatchet. When Shamblers get close, they can grab Ellie and release an acidic gas into the air that slowly chews through health bars. I finally took down this monster by putting some distance between Ellie and the creature and sending several rounds of rifle ammo through its chest.

The infected remain an ever-present danger, but Ellie's human foes might be more formidable. Not only do groups of humans chatter back and forth, call each other by name, and strategize in the middle of combat, they also employ dogs capable of sniffing out Ellie's position. Players

can see Ellie's scent trail when they enter listen mode. Dogs can follow this trail directly to Ellie's location, which encourages you to constantly be on the move. During one combat encounter, I am spotted by a dog that gives me chase for several blocks. These canines' powerful olfactory sense makes them very hard to sneak up behind, so you may want to take them out from a distance with silenced long-range weapons, such as a bow and arrow. Unfortunately, killing dogs does make you feel like a monster.

Another big pillar of The Last of Us series is crafting. Much like the first game, players scavenge rundown buildings and dilapidated houses for useful items that can be combined into new tools and weapons. One of these new gadgets is a trap bomb. This tricky explosive works a bit like a landmine, and I used it to strategically cover my escape and as an early warning system that alerted me whenever I was being followed.

"We came up with a really expanded but solid set of things that you can craft," says Margenau. "But we still have those effective tradeoffs, and the recipes overlap a little more. We went back to that core idea in The Last of Us, which was that we have a moltov and a health pack, and you use the same ingredients to craft both, so you have to make this difficult choice. Do you make this helpful thing to boost your defenses or this awesome offensive thing? We've taken that idea and tried to overlay that onto all the different recipes. It's like this little puzzle of strategy that you have in your backpack in the middle of a fight."

While rummaging through an old shopping district, I find a hunting magazine, which unlocks an entirely new upgrade branch for Ellie. As with the first game, players use supplement pills to unlock new abilities and boost Ellie's skills. However, this time around Ellie has multiple skill trees and some unlock only after players find magazines hidden inside the world. I use pills to improve Ellie's crawl speed and to gain a larger boost from health packs, but other upgrades enhance Ellie's scavenging skills, reduce weapon sway, or open new crafting options. I use all of the supplement pills in my inventory, because Ellie needs every advantage she can get for the battles ahead.

"Any sequel is a challenge because you always want to push everything as far as you can," Margenau says. "We didn't want to lose the essence of what makes this franchise what it is. With Part II, we asked, 'What is it that makes The Last of Us at its core?' We made sure not to lose that core while pushing as hard as we can to give the player as many options as possible. We're really going all out with this."

» Ben Reeves

Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order

The meeting point between many inspirations

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Electronic Arts

» Developer
Respawn

» Release
November 15

Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order draws on several sources to produce its unique breed of action. In moments of timing-focused dodges, parries, and varied melee attacks, the most recent God of War comes to mind. As I open shortcuts, respawn enemies after a rest, and retrieve lost XP following a death, Dark Souls is in evidence. And while sliding down ice drifts from which I leap and swing on ropes across deadly gaps, I'm reminded of Uncharted. Chasing too many influences can sometimes tank a game's potential, leaving everything a half-measure. But that somehow doesn't happen here, as these and other borrowed ideas ably meld into one, at least in the all-too-short hours I played in a near-final version of the game. That's because behind all the disparate ideas, Fallen Order nails one central guiding principle: It feels like Star Wars.

My demo drops me in the middle of the story for nearly three hours of exploration and combat. Fallen Order is suffused with the drama of inhabiting a Jedi after *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*. Cal Kestis is a young Jedi living in hiding as he gets targeted by the Empire and pulled into a plot involving an ancient culture of Force-users called the Zeffo. From the first moments I play, the visuals and audio nail the vibe of the franchise. The music nods to the classic John Williams score, but charts its own motifs and melodies in a seamless blend. Igniting lightsabers, Imperial blaster fire, and landing ships match familiar sound effect cues. From the beat-up starship Cal flies in to the ancient ruins of the planet I explore, the world has a lived-in feel reminiscent of the films.

Flying around the galaxy, players have options of what areas to explore and when. As my demo opens, I can pursue the main story thread on Zeffo, or investigate mysteries on the dark landscapes of Dathomir. Wanting to see more of the unfolding narrative, I head to Zeffo and begin to navigate an abandoned village and an expansive underground temple.

Exploration is a big part of the game. Paths through the level at first seem linear, but I often find shortcuts that connect back to earlier areas, recalling games like Bloodborne. While it's hard to surmise if it's indicative of the broader structure, Zeffo is focused on lengthy stretches of traversal and discovery, punctuated by occasional fights against both Stormtroopers and aggressive local fauna. In one area, I must Force Slow a spinning fan blade to create a series of platforms to cross. In another, I divert into a darkened cave, and use my lightsaber as a flashlight. Inside, Cal uses the rare Force ability of Psychometry to sense echoes of events from objects. In this case, I learn of a desperate mother fleeing from some unnamed threat with her child. I also find an expansion for my healing stim capacity, proving the value of investigating off the beaten path.

Combat is fast-paced, with smart defense as the key to success. Reflecting blaster bolts (which is great fun), parrying attacking troopers, and dodging charging creatures all lead to better outcomes than wild button-mashing assaults, but each demands that I observe enemies carefully, and tap the button in the precise window afforded. On standard difficulty, the timing is generous, but when I try combat on higher settings, enemy damage is dramatically amplified; dodge and parry windows are smaller, and death comes much faster. No matter the challenge, animations look great and varied, especially as Cal learns new powers and dashes back and forth across the field of battle.

Those improved powers unlock using skill points that I spend at meditation spots scattered across the level. Kneel in one of these campfire-like locations, and the skill tree spreads out in front of Cal, roughly split into the three categories of Force, Lightsaber, and Survival skills. Leaping Slash and Dash Strike are just two of the new moves I try out on foes, while other skills like Empowered Slow or Superior Blocking have a more indirect effect on battle.

A significant chunk of my time on Zeffo unfolds in the underground temple of the forgotten race of Force-users as I confront their towering (still active) stone tomb guardians. Within those cavernous walls, I solve an involved puzzle that demands the opening of passages filled with high-powered wind, Force-pushing giant stone spheres, and leaping through an increasingly complex set of traversal challenges. I appreciate the approach to puzzles; I can solve them entirely on my own, but if I'm just not in the mood or get stuck, a button tap calls up a hint from my droid that points me in the right direction.

With secrets I won't spoil here finally discovered, I make my way back to the surface, and notice new avenues of exploration along the way, thanks to my newly acquired Force Push powers. The ascent also changes up what enemies wait for me, including an exciting encounter that sets Jedi against AT-ST Walker. On a broader level, my hours of play manage to walk the challenging design tightrope between skill-oriented battle simulator, story-focused explorer, and occasional set-piece thrill-ride. It's too brief a time to get a complete sense of the game's overall quality, but it is certainly enough to say this with confidence: If I was excited about a new Star Wars single-player game before I played, I walked away with far greater confidence that Respawn has captured a very real slice of the magic that defines the beloved series.

» **Matt Miller**

The Dark Crystal: Age Of Resistance Tactics

Expanding on the show

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Strategy/
Role-Playing

» Publisher
En Masse
Entertainment

» Developer
BonusXP

» Release
2019

After years as a cult favorite film, The Dark Crystal franchise has recently experienced a well-deserved resurgence, thanks to the Age of Resistance prequel show on Netflix. The 10-episode project earned broad acclaim upon its release a few months ago, thanks to its rich fantasy storytelling communicated through technical and artistic mastery. The series gains a companion project, in the form of a tactics game that helps to fill in some of the gaps in the show. And while the project looks to borrow from the likes of Final Fantasy Tactics and Fire Emblem, there's plenty of originality at play.

"The game takes place concurrent to the events of the series and will briefly recap the major events of the series while also delving into some new territory," says Chris Lee, director of games at Netflix. "This means that, narratively, the game can stand on its own and be enjoyed by players who haven't necessarily seen the series."

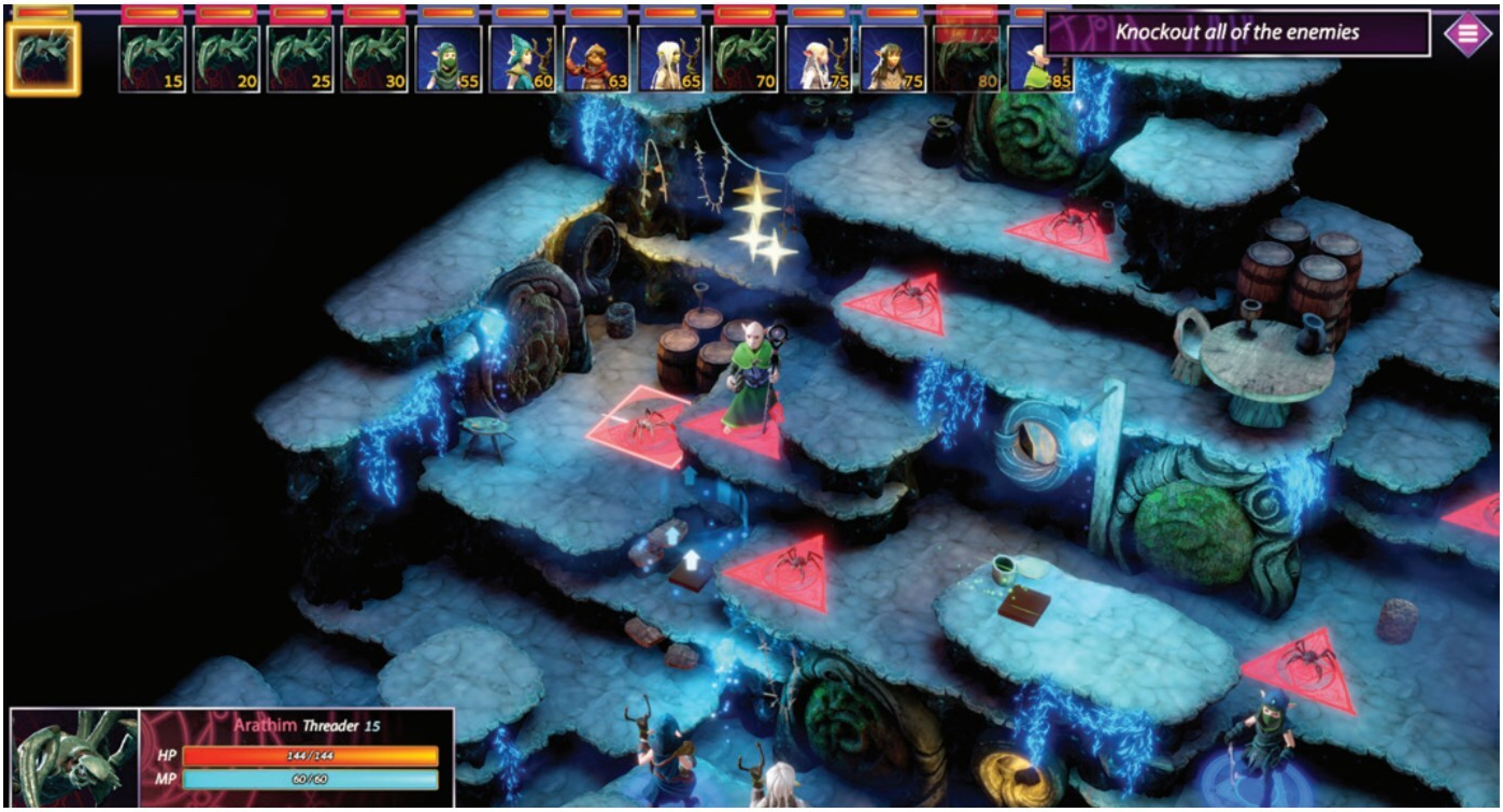
The plan is to let the game tackle some of the important events only hinted at in the cinematic show. For instance, at one point the game follows the characters Gurjin, Naia, and Kylan as they set out to unite the Gelfling clans, an essential plot event that was nonetheless handled off-screen within the series.

The developers are trying to walk the often-tricky line inherent to narratively complex properties. Exposition and world-building is essential, but can't bog down the gameplay. "It's been a terrific collaboration with The Jim Henson Company to make sure we were being as authentic to the universe as possible with the story in the game," Lee says. "Some gamers opt to skip long sequences of dialogue, so we do our best to convey critical story pieces concisely and dynamically."

The strategy-focused gameplay is about building and smartly deploying a customized party of characters. Players eventually have access to 15 playable characters, drawn both from the familiar heroes fans will recognize – like Rian and Deet – and newly created characters for the game, like a potion master named Pombo the Podling. Each hero comes with an iconic job that matches the nature of that character as they appear in the show, but you're free to adjust that role as you see fit, and give them a new job (and accompanying costume) as you see fit.

"We don't have a full list of jobs finalized just yet, but we're aiming to have over 15 in the full game," says BonusXP CEO Dave Pottinger. "You'll be able to swap out the primary and secondary job for your party members to mix and match to your heart's content." Primary jobs relay the bulk of your abilities and stats, while a secondary job lets you carry over an ability that a character wouldn't normally have. "This leads to hundreds of potential combinations of primary job, secondary job, and ability loadouts," Pottinger says. Customization options are further accentuated by the presence of nearly 200 unique gear pieces that can be acquired over the course of the game.

I've yet to get hands-on with the Age of Resistance Tactics myself, but I'm hopeful that the game manages to capture some of what made the recent series so entrancing. What I have seen reveals a focus on varied battlefields, environmental effects like sandstorms, and smart use of a varied party line-up, adding up to a solid if familiar dynamic. Publisher En Masse is promising the game before the end of the year, so we shouldn't have long to wait to see if this video game incarnation can find some measure of the same success enjoyed by the recent Netflix series. » **Matt Miller**



Medal Of Honor: Above And Beyond

Immersive combat and history

The Medal of Honor series is coming back – exclusively in virtual reality. While the choice to turn one of the most revered shooter intellectual properties into a VR title may seem slightly unusual, what we've seen looks promising so far. As a member of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), you tour Europe through a wide variety of environments and situations taking on the Nazi forces. While WWII-themed shooters are hardly a rarity, VR lets Medal of Honor tackle the oft-tread ground in an incredible new way.

Forget reticles and expanding circles for your grenade throws – the game tracks you pulling the pin alongside the velocity of your toss. This makes for realistic lobs that you must time and aim accurately. Injured? You need to inject yourself with meds (well, make the motion of doing so, not actually sticking yourself with a needle) on the fly. You throw knives. You pick up guns, swing them over your shoulder, and all manner of other interactive fare that goes well beyond just seeing characters and objects in the virtual reality space.

Your journey through Europe takes place through various WWII moments, from the beaches of Normandy to Wernher von Braun's laboratories. Despite being a large-scale shooter with dozens of different missions, Medal of Honor is also about paying respect and honoring veterans of WWII. Through videos and footage, players hear from survivors about their actual experiences in the war throughout the journey, sometimes detailing their own personal stories from scenarios or scenes that you may have just seen in the game.

Medal of Honor also includes some form of a multiplayer experience, but Respawn isn't ready to share details yet. Either way, it might be enough for me to pick up a Rift and explore the shooter space when it arrives in 2020.

» **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
Rift

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
Respawn Entertainment

» **Release**
2020

Session

The world is at its feet

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action
(Online TBA)

» Publisher
Crea-ture Studios

» Developer
Crea-ture Studios

» Release
2020

I admit, my first experience with Session late last year was about as graceful as the first time I stepped on a skateboard in real life when I was a kid. I couldn't do much at the time, which put a corresponding damper on my enjoyment. But the version of Session I tried back then was obviously inferior to the one now in Steam Early Access, and the strength of developer Crea-ture's vision is now coming through loud and clear.

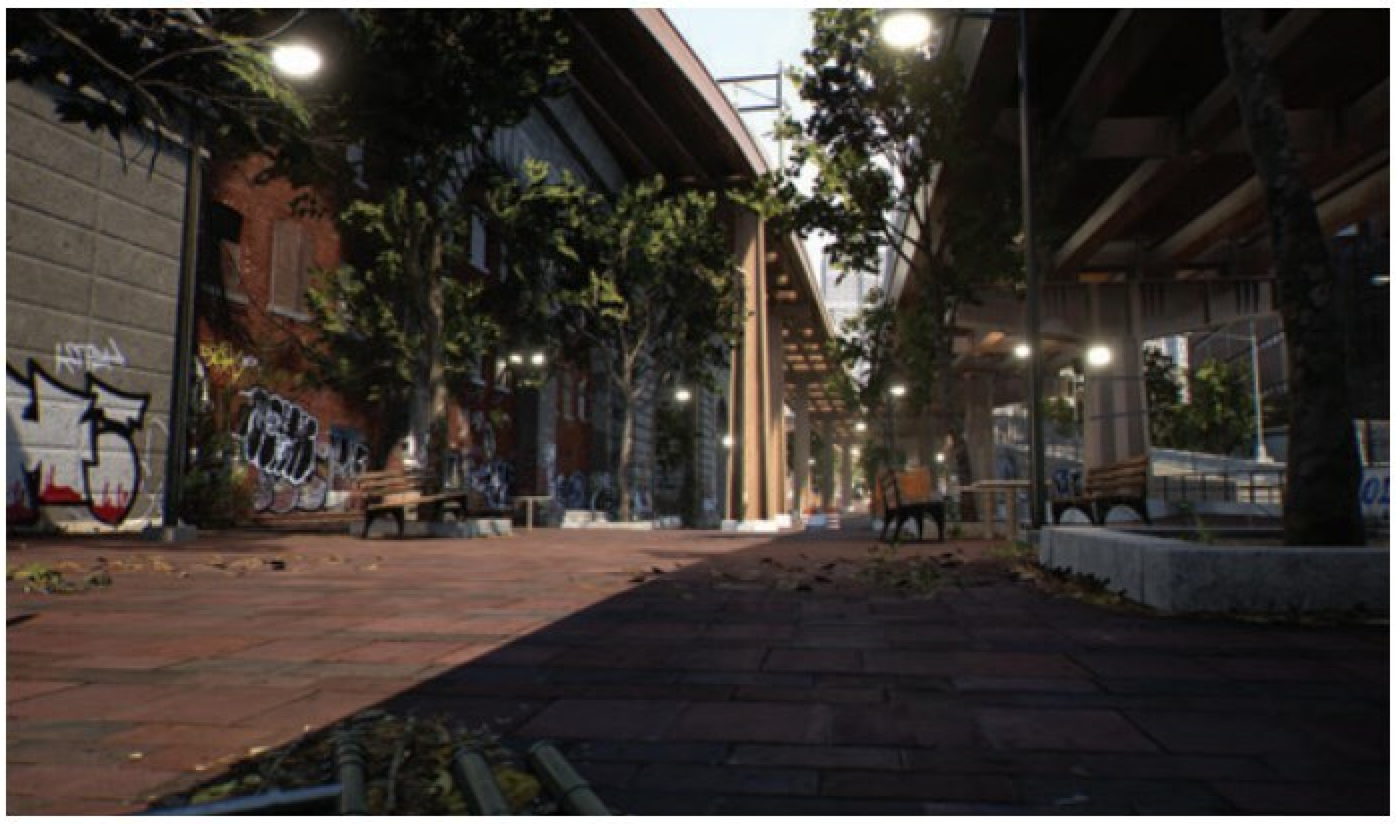
Each of the skater's feet is represented by an analog stick, and while this is a handful in the beginning, it doesn't take long to get used to. This mirrors the sport itself, which pays off handsomely once you pay your dues. I honestly don't know if I did better the more I concentrated on what my feet where doing versus just letting it flow, but stringing tricks together comes naturally, including being able to tweak grinds and slides and trick out of them. More moves are coming in the future, such as impossibles, wall rides, and possibly dark slides, all speaking to the flexibility of the control scheme.

Session currently contains some surprising playstyle options, such as choosing whether you want your rotation speed to be based on trigger pressure versus the speed at which you depress them. Optional assists aid grind detection and keep the analog sticks in the same orientation when your skater goes switch stance, but honestly, I have a feeling it's better to wire your brain to the default controls from the start as this is the way the studio is designing the game.

If you want to preserve and share a moment of beauty, the replay editor offers its own bag of tricks, such as placing multiple camera angles in a single clip (including a fisheye lens), slowing down the action at specific moments, and even changing the time of day from the original clip. Crea-ture says it wants to add a dedicated filmer role in the final game, an ode to those skilled camera skaters who make an art form of the skate video.

Right now Session focuses on the real-life Brooklyn Banks skate spot and its surroundings, and other locations will be available at the full launch, but each area can be whatever you want it to be. You can place objects within environments, including rails, lights, bumps, kickers, and more. You can even get off your board and run around if you like.

At the time of this writing, fans are still waiting for the game to appear in the Xbox Game Preview program ahead of the 2020 launch (Xbox One has a three-month exclusivity launch period before the title hits the PS4), and with other features still on deck such as vert and an overall progression system – as well as the possibility of mod support – there's still much in store for Session. » **Matthew Kato**



Trials Of Mana

A mix of old and new

» Platform
PS4 • Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Action/Role-Playing

» Publisher
Square Enix

» Developer
Square Enix

» Release
April 24

For almost 25 years, North American gamers had thought of Trials of Mana (aka Seiken Densetsu 3) as the one that got away, but Square Enix surprised fans by localizing it for the first time in the Mana Collection. Square Enix didn't stop there; the company also announced a Trials of Mana remake complete with new 3D graphics. I recently went hands-on with the remake and chatted with the team behind it, and came away optimistic about Trials of Mana's new experience.

The remake captures what has always made the series shine: its colorful backdrop. However, it also has received a graphical overhaul, going from 2D pixel art to modern 3D graphics. While the remake of the original Secret of Mana struggled a bit with this transition, Trials of Mana has switched to Unreal Engine 4, and the graphics look much more impressive as a result. The rearranged tracks also do the experience justice, and I stopped many times during my demo just to comment on how much I enjoyed them, especially when I hit the boss battle. As a bonus, you can swap between these and the original score at any time.

The team had to rethink Trials of Mana's battle system to fit with modern times, adding more depth. You have weak and strong attacks, and you can also charge up an attack for a more powerful wallop. Additionally, you have a special attack called a class strike, which you can execute by filling a gauge through regular attacks. However, nothing is quite as big of a game-changer as the ability to jump, which comes in handy for obstacles or enemies with AoE attacks.

The developers wanted to make it feel less like button mashing, which often plagued the original. But what really brought about the changes was the realization that some things – like not having multiple attack types, and being unable to jump out of the way of enemies – don't feel right in a modern, 3D setting.

Compared to the original, the new controls feel smoother and faster, and the A.I., (an area the series has struggled with) also seems improved. My teammates launched their special attacks when necessary and were much better about avoiding danger. I didn't feel like I had to babysit them, and could just focus on my character.

If you've been playing Trials of Mana on the recently released Mana collection, you should still feel right at home with the remake (apart from the revamped combat). "We didn't want to do anything to [change] the characters, including the enemies and feel of the world itself," says producer Shinichi Tatsuke. "It was a game made in 1995 and now it's coming up in 2020. We tried to imagine – with the same world and the same characters – how would this game have been made if it had been made for the first time in 2020?"

Playing the Trials of Mana demo left me impressed. It seems to do enough to modernize the combat without changing too much needlessly. Hopefully, it delivers in a satisfying way for fans and newcomers alike.
» **Kimberley Wallace**

Fairy Tail

Getting the guild back together

» Platform
PS4 • Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Koei Tecmo

» Developer
Gust

» Release
2020

Fairy Tail, a long-running manga and anime, is receiving the video game treatment. Gust, known for its Atelier series, is bringing it to life under creator Hiro Mashima's supervision, ensuring our journey to the continent of Fiore is as close to the true experience as possible. For those not in the know, Fairy Tail places you in a world of mages and wizards. It follows the exploits of a mage guild, taking jobs to earn their keep and learning more about the world's mysteries.

You control main character and Dragon Slayer Natsu, but over 10 characters are playable. In addition to Natsu, the following have been confirmed: Wendy, Lucy, Grey, Erza, Gajeel, and Juvia. The game doesn't cover the entirety of the anime but will feature several arcs from it, such as Tenrou Island, Grand Magic Games, and Tartaros.

The story focuses on the point in the anime where the characters are rebuilding the guild, which ties directly into the gameplay. You accept missions and requests, slowly raising your guild's renown to new heights via a lettered ranking system. As you earn money from missions, you can also use it to upgrade your guild's exterior, such as adding a magic shop or a better quest board. Characters join your guild through the story, but you need to build a bond with some before they join your party. You can also recruit supporting characters (not for battle) to help around the guild.

The town of Magnolia has been recreated in 3D and it looks gorgeous. Everything was crisp and clear in my demo, and the cutscenes were in line with the anime. Magnolia is your base of operations, but it's not your only destination. You also travel around on the world map, gaining access to new locales as you advance in the story and complete quests. Areas look similar to the layout of the Atelier games, filled with enemies, items, and materials. Gust confirmed there would be a crafting system, but it wouldn't be anything overly complicated. You use the materials you find to create magical crystals, which strengthen your characters.

Battles are turn-based, with a focus on managing your MP wisely alongside chaining attacks and performing combination specials. Since Fairy Tail is all about magic, Gust is tying that into your strategy, as elemental weaknesses are a big part of combat. Associate head of Gust Keisuke Kikuchi said to expect all the signature magic and some of the "legendary, flashy" spells.

Gust feels like a natural fit for Fairy Tail, and I was surprised at how well the studio's expertise with the Atelier series complements Fairy Tail's world. Time will tell how it shakes out, but it's interesting to see Gust approaching a big property with such fanfare.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

The Waylanders

Undeniable potential

Crowdfunding has provided its share of hits and misses, but thanks to the relatively new way to fund video games, we've seen a spike in the number of outstanding classic role-playing titles. Games like Pillars of Eternity, Divinity: Original Sin, and The Banner Saga stand out as success stories in the crowdfunding space. With the core team collaborating with industry veterans like former Dragon Age director Mike Laidlaw, former Telltale designer Emily Grace Buck, longtime RPG writer Chris Avellone, and Fallout and Dragon Age composer Inon Zur, The Waylanders certainly has the potential to join those titles.

The Waylanders is a traditional party-based RPG that requires you to strategically approach battles and effectively utilize the skills of your team. Whether you're looking for frantic, fast-paced battles or slow, methodically planned fights, The Waylanders hopes to deliver on both fronts. When entering a battle, you can control your characters in real-time. However, if things get a bit too hectic, you can pause the action and queue up actions for your characters, allowing them to unleash an impressive flurry when the action resumes. You can also team up with your companions for team formations; I loved how the party huddled together with their shields like a tortoise and jabbed their spears at any enemies dumb enough to get too close.

The events of the story unfold after the Celts meet with their gods for the first time and negotiations take a horrible turn. The world is in disarray, flooded by monsters and magical beings, and all hope for peace is seemingly gone. However, your character has been unrestrained from the natural flow of time, allowing them to travel between the Celtic era and the Medieval era and make decisions that affect the other era. Using this ability, your team must work to restore the natural order of peace to the land.

The Waylanders is about giving players choices. In addition to decisions that lead to multiple endings, as well as the aforementioned different ways to approach combat situations, the title allows for full and robust character customization. When assembling your character, you can choose from 30 advanced classes and five distinct races based on mythology from the era.

Those looking for a Dragon Age-inspired, traditional RPG should keep their eyes on The Waylanders. With unique approaches to player choice in nearly every aspect of the game, I'm intrigued to see just how far-reaching the consequences can be. Unfortunately, we can't time travel like the game's protagonist, so we'll just have to wait until next year to see how it pans out. » **Brian Shea**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Gato Studio

» **Developer**
Gato Studio

» **Release**
2020

Total War Saga: Troy

Homer's heroes and history

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Sega

» **Developer**
Creative Assembly

» **Release**
2020

While the Total War series has often been stoically rooted in historical fact, offshoots like Total War: Three Kingdoms and Total War: Warhammer have brought in minor and major fantasy elements. Total War Saga: Troy brings the historical backdrop of ancient Greece and mythologies of the Trojan War and Homer's *Iliad* together for a tactical and flavorful look at larger-than-life heroes, gods, and even monsters, as things like minotaurs and centaurs are reimagined as berserkers and cavalry.

Players can expect the traditional blend of nation-building and real-time combat, putting strategy to work from two different major angles. Building up resources and controlling territory is an important goal, but bringing your incredible heroes to battle is where the action is. You can tap legendary characters – complete with legendary powers – to lead your armies, such as Hector, Achilles, Odysseus, and more. While you can draw from a solid pool of heroes from the era, the classic conflict of the prideful and aggressive Achilles and the staunch Hector form one of the epic battles between an unstoppable force and an immovable object. As is the case with many other entries in the series, each faction comes with its own special units and tactics.

Total War Saga: Troy flirts with some fantasy elements while remaining grounded to gritty Bronze-Age warfare. Players can seek boons from the gods, but don't expect Poseidon to show up and drown your enemies; favors from above generally come in the form of subtle buffs to give your troops or economies an edge. Strange creatures from myth also appear, but have been modified to fit reality. Minotaurs, for instance, are not actually bull-creatures that live in mazes and eat people, but brutish units wearing bull-inspired garb that can smash into and destroy enemy lines. Similarly, centaurs are not half-man, half-horse people but specialty cavalry units.

Total War has been at its best over the last few years when the series has been willing to break outside the historical box, and tapping into myth and legend for a good old Grecian war seems like a great way to reimagine some amazing conflicts. I'm looking forward to diving into the heroes – and the history – when it hits next year.
» **Daniel Tack**

Tales Of Arise

Changing the future

The long-running Tales series is ready for change. Like all popular franchises, there comes a time for reinvention, and that's exactly the aim of Tales of Arise. Bandai Namco is not forgetting what made fans fall in love with Tales in the first place, but Arise is the chance for evolution.

When Arise was revealed, fans noticed a different, more mature art style. The goal is ultimately to strike a balance between the hallmark anime style and photorealistic artwork. You can still expect a colorful world to explore, but enemies look more menacing this time around, thanks to Unreal Engine 4.

While much has been kept under wraps, Bandai Namco has started to reveal more about the story and world. You see the story through the eyes of Alphen, who is from Dahna. Rena, the homeland of the other main character, Shionne, has ruled over Dahna for the past 300 years, and it hasn't been pretty. Rena, with its advanced technology, has depleted Dahna's natural resources, keeping the people subservient and miserable. When the pair encounter each other, everything changes, putting them on a quest to change the future.

The two complement each others' abilities well. Shionne has the power to cast healing artes, while Alphen wields the "Torch Flame Sword." When Alphen uses this sword, the fire damages him, meaning he needs someone like Shionne around to heal him. Thankfully, Alphen doesn't feel any of the actual pain, which is why he can use the sword in the first place. This especially comes in handy because Shionne has thorns growing all over her body that hurt anyone who touches her. Discovering why these two are the way they are is part of the journey.

While we have yet to see much of Arise's combat, Bandai Namco did indicate it wanted to keep it familiar for fans, so we expect it to be in line with what we've seen from its fast-paced, combo-driven action-battle system. However, we also can't wait to see what enhancements it produces.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

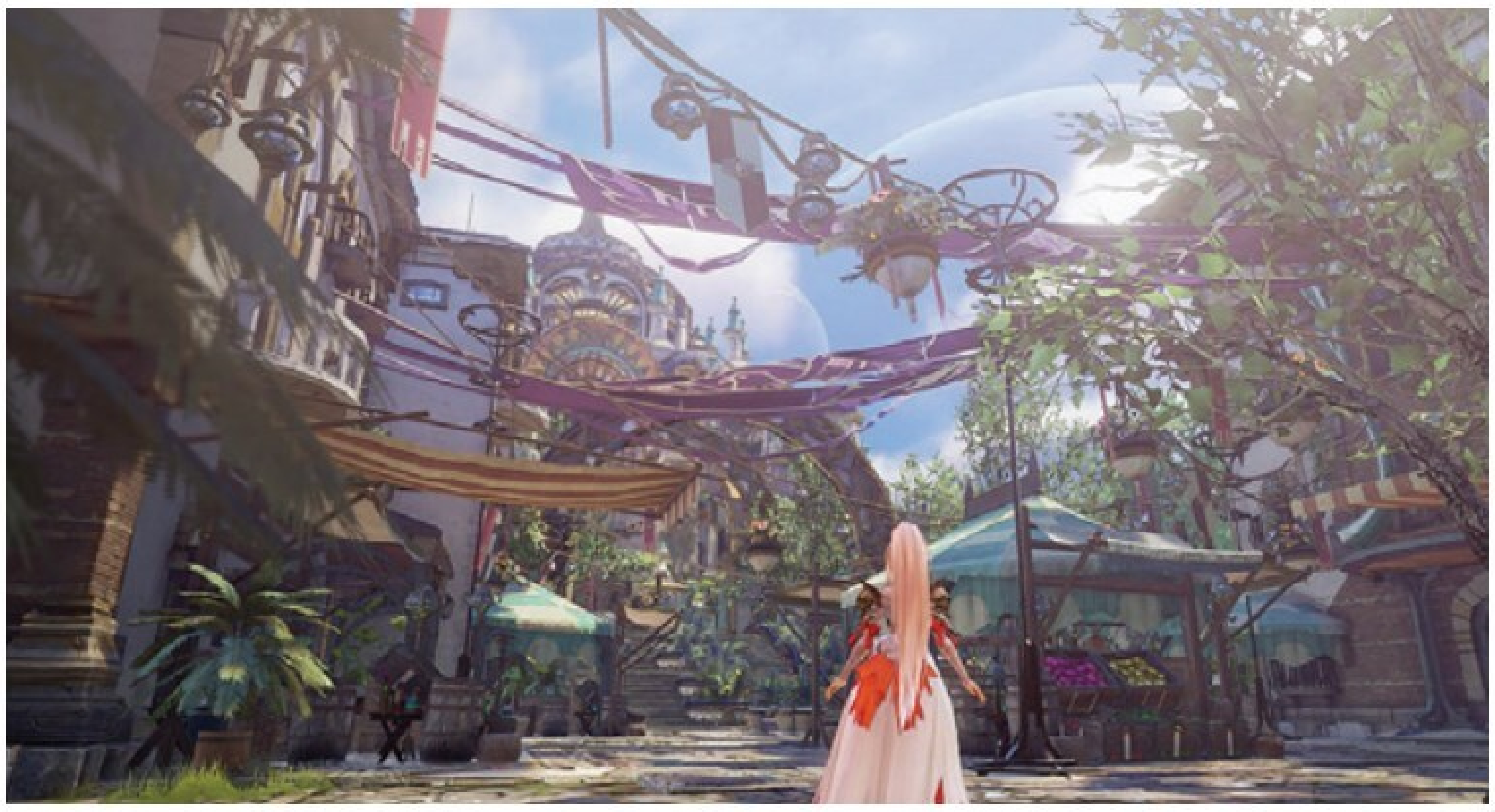
» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Action/Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Bandai Namco

» **Developer**
Bandai Namco

» **Release**
2020



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reviews

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

84 The Outer Worlds

Imagine a meeting point between Mass Effect and Fallout, with a clever setting, excellent writing, and tons of fun ways to approach problems. That's The Outer Worlds, a new RPG/shooter from developer Obsidian Entertainment (the studio behind Fallout: New Vegas). Even though it takes inspiration from an array of classic titles, its irreverent humor and flexible gameplay ensure that The Outer Worlds keeps the surprises coming.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Those old-timey Pilgrim shoes with the dumb buckle.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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The Outer Worlds

Good company

9.25

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Role-Playing/Shooter **Publisher** Private Division **Developer** Obsidian Entertainment **Release** October 25 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Create a unique RPG that finds a meeting point between Fallout and Mass Effect, with space-faring action and choice-driven progression

» Graphics
While the visuals aren't cutting-edge, the colorful graphics do a good job conveying the strange new worlds of Halcyon

» Sound
Your crew has an excellent cast of voice performers, and the music successfully evokes wonder and urgency as appropriate

» Playability
Cumbersome inventory management is my only complaint on this front. The controls work well otherwise, regardless of your preferred playstyle

» Entertainment
Finding your way through (or around) various problems is fun, and a streak of silly humor keeps the tone light enough to counterbalance the darker themes

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Your crew on the *Unreliable* are some of the best and brightest in Halcyon – but considering the sorry state of humanity in deep space, that isn't saying much. Your compatriots include a religious zealot, a heavy drinker, and other imperfect individuals. Despite their flaws, this plucky team can help you find remarkable and unconventional solutions to the colony's biggest problems. Whether you want to heal a rift between warring factions or destabilize a governing body, the underdogs of the *Unreliable* can get it done.

Like the misfits it features, The Outer Worlds finds inspiring success despite its rough edges. It has technical and visual quirks, and can veer dangerously close to feeling archaic, but these aren't the qualities that define the game. Instead, The Outer Worlds distinguishes itself with a crumbling space colony controlled by cartoonishly evil corporate interests, then sets you and your party loose to explore, aid, and incite. Maybe that involves gunplay and innocent casualties – or maybe you can talk your way out of conflict altogether. The Outer Worlds finds brilliant and fun ways to blend signature aspects of well-known series like Fallout and Mass Effect; it is a space adventure featuring a likable cast and an irreverent-yet-dangerous frontier, with entertaining gameplay bridging the gaps.

The single best part is the freedom you have in approaching the various problems plaguing Halcyon, because The Outer Worlds deftly presents options beyond simple "stealth or melee" scenarios. In one case, I needed to access a high-security area in a government building. I found a woman who could sneak me in if I convinced her I was interested in a romantic rendezvous, or I could investigate a lunch-related feud between her and a coworker to win her over. Another option was simply stealing a disguise, which also required a silver tongue to divert suspicion if detected. Of course, I could have also opened fire and fought my way through, but I was so adept at lying and persuading that I usually only considered naked hostility as a last resort. This kind of flexibility makes The Outer Worlds especially satisfying, because no matter how you specialize, the team at Obsidian provides something clever to do apart from deciding how to kill folks.

Though I often sought nonaggressive solutions, I had fun with combat when it happened. Again, the flavor of encounters changes based on how you've allocated your skill points. My first character was melee-focused, with lots of points invested in buffing my companions; eventually, they could handle most fights without me. For my second playthrough, I made a more active hero, specialized in handguns and rifles with perks spent on improving a tactical time-slowing power (similar to Fallout's V.A.T.S. system). Regardless of your focus, the controls are responsive and feel great.

The crew of the *Unreliable* are solid traveling buddies, assuming you choose to recruit them. In different ways, they all struggle to find a place to belong in Halcyon, and I enjoyed getting to know them gradually through a mixture of conversations, ambient banter, and personal quests. However, these interactions are too sparse. What's there is excellent; their dialogue and stories are well-done, and I like how most of them don't fit neatly into established archetypes. But they can also feel oddly peripheral considering the time you spend with them by your side.

Structurally, the game follows the blueprint established by classics like Knights of the Old Republic. You go to a planet or settlement, do some quests, and eventually make a bigger decision that determines the fate of the area. Over the course of my two playthroughs – one thorough, one fast – I saw these scenarios play out in different ways, and I was a bit disappointed at how black-and-white the options are. Most boil down to siding with a heartless corporation or a group of freedom-loving dissidents, though completing sidequests usually reveals an optimal third option, like bringing feuding groups together. This predictability diminishes the magnitude of the seemingly significant choices, and combined with the static explanation screens you get during the ending, this is an area where The Outer Worlds feels outdated.

Even if the larger beats don't always land, The Outer Worlds shines with a constant stream of small, bright moments. An amusing interaction with a clueless guard. A sugary corporate jingle. A brutal sneak attack. A solution to a problem you are sure won't work, but it does. The team at Obsidian excels at encouraging creative experimentation within its responsive and absurd setting, ensuring that every visit to Halcyon is full of delightful surprises.
» Joe Juba

Destiny 2: Shadowkeep

Setting the stage

Style Online Multiplayer Shooter **Publisher** Bungie **Developer** Bungie **Release** October 1 **Rating** T

In a living game like Destiny 2, it's almost impossible to separate the content of an expansion from the changes to the core game that accompany release. In the case of Shadowkeep, the distinction is especially hazy. In terms of new content available during the first week, Bungie's latest launch is comparatively modest in scope, focused mostly on enemies and locations that have been reimagined from earlier Destiny releases, and a story that does more to set the stage for the future than tell a meaningful plot on its own. But the broader reworking of fundamental systems, presentation, and investment gameplay is profound, and sets the franchise on its best footing yet for a promising future.

After a long absence, one of Destiny's most enjoyable characters makes a return in Shadowkeep. Eris Morn's plaintive and foreboding pronouncements are a good fit for the story at hand, which sees our Guardian facing down nightmarish specters of the bosses we've fought for the last half decade. The biggest treat is a return to the excellent Moon destination from the original game, now transformed by further cataclysmic upheaval. It's fascinating to explore what has changed and what has stayed the same, even if it ultimately means that the "new" destination is mostly a rehash of somewhere we've already been.

The campaign includes several riveting missions, but ends on an anticlimax. As well as it sets the stakes for future years of drama, it's disappointing to have so much build-up and so little payoff. Even so, there's a convincing melding of narrative threads, leading to a tapestry that loops in the Hive, the Vex, and the long-hinted menace of the Darkness finally beginning to make its presence known.

New nightmare hunts offer an escalating series of compelling battles, and the Vex offensive is an entertaining but repetitive new matchmade six-person event that includes some especially flashy firefights. I'm happy to see a couple of solid new strikes enter rotation, and the three additional PvP maps are always welcome, even if two of them are just the return of old favorites. New rotating PvP modes promise variety, and there's now greater flexibility to select the specific game mode you want to play, which is a welcome change. I've come to expect a new raid to provide one of the most riveting sets of encounters available in FPS gaming, and that streak remains unbroken with Garden of Salvation, a rollicking crusade into the arcane mysteries of the Vex, demanding precision timing and ceaseless teamwork.

More than ever before, Shadowkeep moves Destiny squarely toward MMO and RPG conventions. A thoughtfully constructed armor system works in tandem with the new unlockable artifact to dramatically expand playstyle customization. That leads to distinct loadouts and armor sets that can be tinkered to fit given activities. Lore engagement is closer to the surface of the player experience, and that fiction continues to blossom with complexity and imagination. XP across the season leads to desirable designated rewards. Across the board, there are more opportunities for long-tail engagement and progression.

Perhaps most importantly, Shadowkeep is doubling down on the strategy that led to success over the last year, with ever more weekly content drops that grow and expand both the available things to do, and what is happening in the universe. Bungie has taken the idea of a living game world seriously, and it shows. A regularly updated schedule lets players know what to expect and when. My Guardians grow over time, and the world is changing alongside them.

Shadowkeep is a strong release, but frustrations crop up. With the additional customization features, currency and terminology bloat is a real problem. Many features or modes are poorly explained or without tutorial. It's difficult to know which bounties, quests, challenges, or activities to focus on, a problem only exacerbated for new or returning players. Moreover, the fixation on bounties to progress means that players are often forced into undesirable playstyles, like using weapons or subclasses they don't enjoy. Much of the older armor has been invalidated by the new offerings, and it's a shame that so many memorable rewards have been left behind.

Shadowkeep and the new Season of the Undying content launches alongside Destiny 2's free-to-play New Light, which welcomes an influx of players, but also comes with the commensurate focus on the in-game store, and cosmetic items that cost more than they should. That's a tradeoff that frustrates me, but I'm willing to accept, as the available free offering is stellar, and invites more players into a vibrant, and frequently helpful community of players. Many of those newcomers will undoubtedly take the deeper dive to buy and engage with the current season's offerings, and that's good news for everyone. With Shadowkeep, the Destiny series is well positioned in both narrative and gameplay frameworks for what lies ahead; the joy of seeing that shape come into focus is exactly why it's worth logging in with each passing week.

» **Matt Miller**

9

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Return to the moon for new adventures, and witness the continued evolution of the Destiny franchise toward MMO/RPG styling

» **Graphics**
From haunted corridors far beneath the lunar surface to teeming overgrown gardens, Bungie continues to meld fantasy inspirations into its sci-fi playground

» **Sound**
The orchestral scoring remains among the best in gaming, while the exaggerated personas of the lead characters are voiced with pathos and emotion

» **Playability**
Gunplay continues to set the industry standard. The game still needs to do a better job of guiding its players to needed information and tasks, especially over a shifting leveling curve

» **Entertainment**
Not as expansive in scope as previous fall expansions, Shadowkeep's standout feature is instead the way it redefines the core loop and encourages week-to-week investment

» **Replay Value**
High

Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare

A new theater of war

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
A three-headed experience that succeeds in multiplayer, gets lost in the dark in single-player, and misses the mark completely in cooperative play

» Graphics
Infinity Ward's new engine delivers a high level of realism in the lighting and character models, but the environments are mostly mundane given the focus on smaller conflicts

» Sound
The music, voice acting, and rattling gunfire are all excellent, heightening the intensity in all modes

» Playability
The pitch-perfect gunplay is joined by a wide selection of multiplayer modes that give players variety, including short and fun 2v2 fights

» Entertainment
Leveling up guns is ridiculously fun, and the breadth of modes keeps this experience from feeling repetitive. This is a game you can sink tons of time into

» Replay Value
Moderately high

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Shooter (64-Player Online) **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Infinity Ward **Release** October 25 **Rating** M

Modern Warfare is familiar in name, but its content carries a different tone and flow than we've come to expect from the annualized Call of Duty series. Developer Infinity Ward takes big chances in both multiplayer and the single-player campaign, and while some of the ideas hit with deadly precision, others fall flat.

As great as it is to have a single-player campaign back after its hiatus in Black Ops 4, Infinity Ward shifts the focus away from the large-scale conflicts the series is known for toward more intimate firefights where the horrors of war are thoroughly (and grossly) explored. This story experience gets uncomfortable, putting the player in direct control of a young girl who is forced to kill, as well as a soldier who is captured and waterboarded. The waterboarding even unfolds through a terrible minigame where you have to move your head back and forth to dodge the water. These gameplay sequences feel shoehorned in and do nothing to move the narrative forward.

Innocent civilians constantly barge through doors right in front of you or pop up from behind cover, creating intense and disturbing situations where you may accidentally shoot them. Infinity Ward wants you to feel the gruesome nature of war, and it's tiring how often you are presented with these moments. Outside of a couple cleverly designed sniping missions and a ridiculous moment where I piloted remote-controlled toy planes, I didn't have much fun playing through many of the story missions, given the fairly pedestrian combat.

While the campaign isn't as big in scope or as thrilling as most Call of Duty games, it tells a hell of a story – perhaps the best in this series since, well, Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare. The character performances are fantastic – especially for Captain Price, Farah, and Hadir, who are legitimately interesting, woven well into the conflict. I also love how the story flows seamlessly from moment to moment without loading screens, much like a Naughty Dog production.

As is the case with most Call of Duty games, the beating heart of Modern Warfare is competitive play, which succeeds both by shrinking and expanding the scale of war. I found the most rewarding multiplayer experience is a new mode called Gunfight, which is designed for just four players. These 2v2 matches unfold on tiny square maps that deliver immediate action, and end almost as quickly as they begin, given only two kills are needed for a team to win a round. Part of the brilliance of this mode is how level the playing field is: Both teams have the same loadouts, and the map designs are fairly symmetrical. Laying down and camping is also frowned upon, as the match timer counts down quickly, and overtime pushes both teams to be the first to capture a flag. I can't stress how fun and frantic these battles are; I couldn't get enough of them.

Modern Warfare also balloons more than you would expect in a new take on Ground War, which borrows a page from Battlefield's playbook with 64-players battling for control points on a sprawling map. This is another enjoyable avenue of play, but for entirely different reasons. Skill and precision take a backseat to organized chaos, as snipers line rooftops, kill streaks rain death every which way, and a tank could blast you from halfway across the map. Ground War is frantic, and while you won't make much of a difference as one player, ends up being a great way to blow off steam after competing in this iteration's excellently designed team deathmatch.

Much like leveling a character in an RPG, players can level up guns – a process every bit as captivating as it sounds. With over 50 unlockable attachments and perks per firearm, players can sculpt their wares to their liking, and are pushed to keep using the same ones to keep getting new things for them.

As awesome as competitive play is, I can't recommend players spend much time in Special Ops, Modern Warfare's troubled version of cooperative play. Traversing a huge map with friends to hack computers and destroy heavily armored vehicles is a fun concept, and requires strategy. Aggravating bot spawns that can happen right behind you make the experience overly difficult in an unfair way. Even when my team was organized and moving slowly to clear out any threat, all it took was one enemy from behind to kill someone and create an unrecoverable scenario.

All told, Modern Warfare should have received a new Call of Duty subhead given just how different its avenues of play are. Not every one of Infinity Ward's ideas works, but a few are successful enough that I could see them as series staples. Modern Warfare's accomplishments may not be as pronounced as Black Ops 4's, but it's still delivers a hell of a multiplayer experience. Gunfight alone is worth the price of admission. » **Andrew Reiner**

Ghost Recon Breakpoint

The soul of a drone

Style 1-Player Shooter (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Paris **Release** October 4 **Rating** M

Ghost Recon Breakpoint is a conflicted mess of an open-world experience. It is unreliable in almost everything it offers, from tactical firefights and enemy intelligence to open-world exploration and mission flow. Developer Ubisoft Paris also didn't solve the issue of repetition that plagued Ghost Recon Wildlands – it's even worse this time around. Flashes of brilliance are scattered amid the turmoil, but no matter how much you try to latch onto them, the game finds another way to pull you down and upend your progress.

When Breakpoint works as intended, it delivers thrilling four-player cooperative strategy. This includes satisfying stealth, fun drone surveillance, heavy firearms that kick like mules, plenty of useful loot, and maybe even a gripping story sequence that makes you look forward to the next mission. When things don't go as planned, Breakpoint is broken. Bosses come back to life, teammates respawn over a mile away, your character is inexplicably unable to aim over a barrier, and enemies stop dead in their tracks right in front of you. In some of my play sessions, a mission would go off without a hitch. In others, my squad couldn't do anything without some kind of glitch (like one of us falling through the world geometry) throwing a kink in our strategies.

Ubisoft's decision to create a fictional place is a success that pays dividends from start to finish. Auroa is an island where the brightest minds in technology congregate to improve the world. The scenic mountains, valleys, swamps, and tundra, feature pockets of artistic sci-fi like industrialization. Helicopter rides give players a chance to fully appreciate this beautifully realized world, which is filled with side missions, random points of interest that hold loot and collectibles, and some areas are even used for fun 4v4 PvP Ghost War battles.

Mission setups are usually interesting, giving players numerous interaction points, including some that require a little detective work, like tracking down a document or interrogating a high-ranking official to learn where a dangerous target is. As varied as the mission setups are, the act of completing these tasks is repetitive, and you are rarely challenged in different ways. Ubisoft's other open-world shooter, The Division 2, did a fantastic job with mission flow, taking players to through long and well-conceived areas. Breakpoint is the exact opposite, pushing players to either aggressively or stealthily reach a point of interest and then move on to the next. As empowering as it is to enter a location however you want, the lack of structure makes every mission feel routine. With few enemy types to confront over the course of the entire game, most assaults usually end up feeling the same, too. Being able to spawn a helicopter from any bonfire means you don't really ever need to use any of the other vehicles to explore the world. The best path to success is doing the same things over and over again.

That said, stealth in Breakpoint is handled admirably. The auto-stick cover system creates damning problems for shooting over obstacles, but it works fairly well for sneaking, and the enemy observation meter fills slowly enough to allow for quick course correction should you get stuck on the wrong side of a wall. If the enemies are alerted to your position, they attack with everything they have and can kill you and your squad quickly. However, they don't stand a chance if you hunker down in a protected spot. They are too aggressive, and will funnel to you one by one until their entire division is wiped out, making most missions fairly easy if you can find such a location – and many areas are filled with rooms you can use to exploit the A.I.

Enemies drop plenty of loot, and Ubisoft does a nice job of making most of it meaningful. As you progress, you slowly advance in rank (with 150 being the ultimate goal to topple the final mission, which you can access from the beginning). The loot is awesome in how bountiful and varied it is, but none of it makes much sense cosmetically. My best gear consisted of a stocking cap and plastic surgeon gloves.

The most telling moment in Breakpoint came during the final mission. My team successfully took down the final boss, and then hacked a computer to end a crisis. My character nodded approvingly and smiled awkwardly, and then, just when it seemed like the credits would roll, my squad reappeared in the world, and the boss was back. This time around, he was invincible, and ended up wiping us out with ease. When we respawned, the mission had reset to its first step. It was an unfortunate bug that wiped out a good hour of work.

This final moment with Breakpoint sums up the game perfectly. There was a sense of victory, and then it all fell apart and became a maddening mess. I had some fun playing with friends, but constantly found myself wondering how this follow-up could go so wrong.
» Andrew Reiner

6

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
A sloppy open-world experience that offers plenty to do, but hardly any of it is executed in clever or stable ways

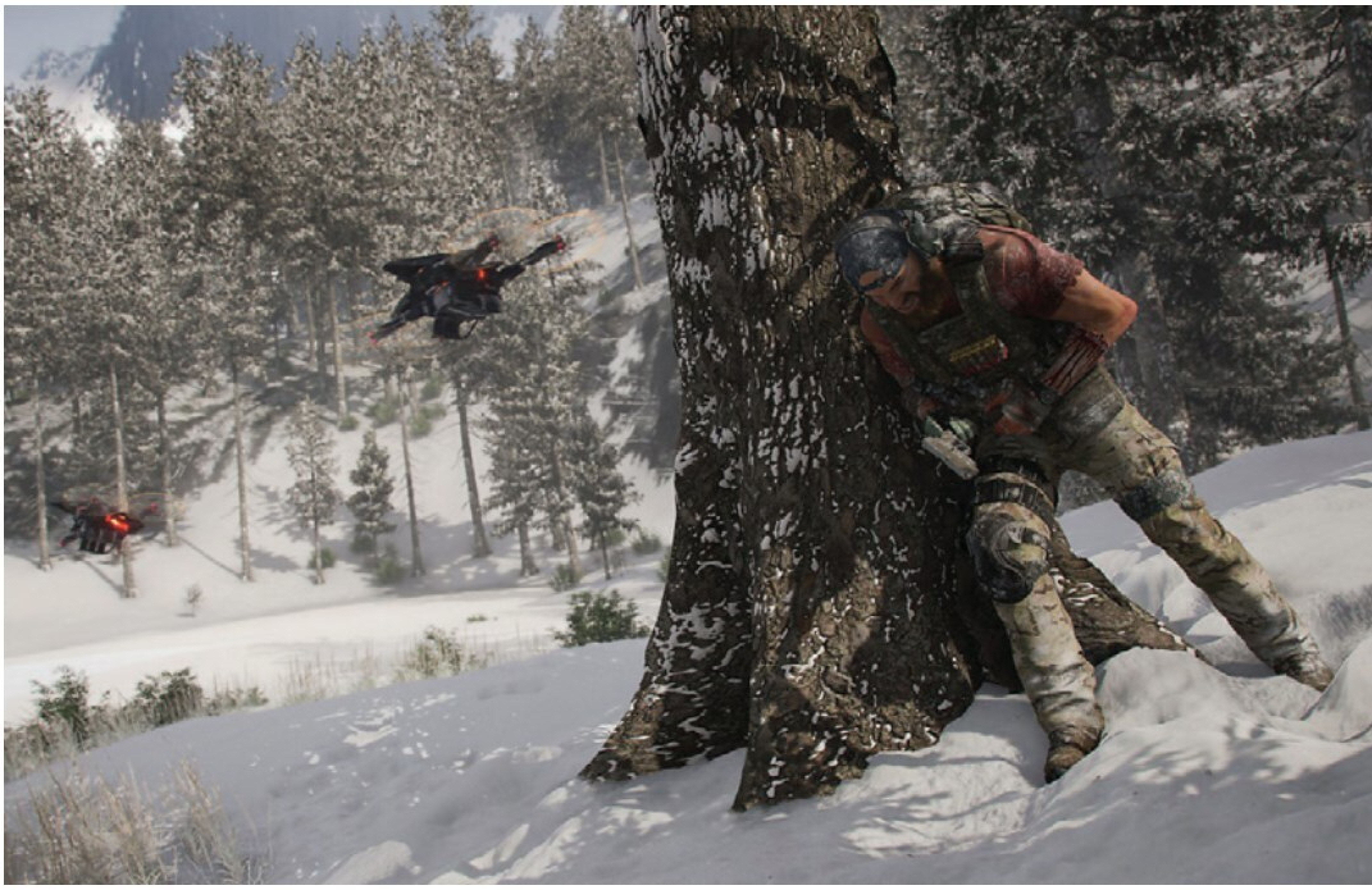
» Graphics
Auroa is the best part of the game – an island filled with beautiful forests, mountains, and cleverly designed near-future settlements

» Sound
The noisy pop of the guns is satisfying, but isn't enough to compensate for the awful dialogue

» Playability
The guns feel great and allow players to line up shots from great distances. Enemy A.I. is hilariously bad and can be exploited for easy victories. Your character can't walk on most inclines without falling, which is odd

» Entertainment
Playing with friends can be fun, especially when stealth is working. But whether the game "works" is the key question at all times

» Replay Value
Moderate



FIFA 20

A well-worn institution

7.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (22 Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Vancouver **Release** September 27 **Rating** E

It's hard to know what FIFA is anymore. Like EA Sports' Madden or 2K's NBA 2K, FIFA has been absorbed into the larger sports culture. It's been adopted by the athletes themselves, and is a symbol for video games in general. FIFA may be everywhere, but where does that leave FIFA 20? The game is not any worse off than it was a year ago, but it also feels anchorless. It has noticeable little improvements in every corner, but it lacks a strong core. FIFA 20 feels like a team without a captain.

Volta, the new small-side football mode (sometimes with sideline walls), is not strong enough to carry the torch for FIFA 20. The optional story (which you may as well call Volta: Hold Square to Skip) isn't compelling, and the mode's relatively confined spaces only accentuate some of the weak points in FIFA's gameplay. Loose ball pickups, ball physics, and poor teammate A.I. can all go wrong; when they do, Volta's small playing spaces mean the loss of possession can lead to a swift goal against. Similarly, I don't get fancy with the ball much (apart from passing it off the walls, which is fun) due to the risk involved of coughing it up. In fact, you don't even get bonus points after a match for stylish play, which makes me even more reluctant.

When the gameplay is on a normal-sized pitch, which allows wingers to run free and more team strategies to develop, FIFA 20 feels more at home. Smart passing opens up attacking opportunities. Playing defense, while not as overpowering as last year (in fact, calling over a teammate for help doesn't do much), feels rewarding. I like to take control, cordon off an opponent's attack, and clog up passing lanes. One of my favorite things to execute – given the time, skill, and teammate movement – is to pump the ball into the wide channels for the wingers. This puts immediate pressure on the opposing fullbacks, and is something that the A.I., to its credit, does right back at you.

FIFA 20's gameplay produces satisfying moments, like addressing the ball with small touches to maneuver the ball and keep possession, but it's hampered by foibles like inconsistent/sometimes-floaty ball physics, bad keeper rebounds, and players comically falling down or feeling like they're on ice. The latter happens even though the actual jostling command is well executed.

As usual, these kinds of eccentricities are magnified in Ultimate Team mode, when chemistry and other variables are involved. While this mode is the financial powerhouse of the series and EA as a company, Ultimate Team in FIFA 20 isn't a destination mode. The new season format doles out linear rewards for your activities, but the rewards (coins, cosmetics, the occasional pack, and more) are often shrug-worthy. Unexciting things like balls and team badges are placed on steep ascending tiers that bake more grind into the mode.

Ultimate Team's multiplayer may be hyper-focused on getting the right players, but even the mode's bad pack odds are preferable to the fact that Volta only gives out cosmetic items (at launch, anyway). Sadly, it's more exhilarating to try and survive in Ultimate Team's piranha tank for player cards than it is to play Volta for throwaway cosmetics. Unfortunately, this is where this series is at: asking fans to put up with less-than-ideal aspects for morsels of fun.

Other modes like Career (player or manager) and Pro Clubs are also stingy, including a few new elements that may solve long-standing problems or address fans' requests (like being able to practice in Pro Clubs) but which simply cannot disguise that these modes haven't been fundamentally improved. For instance, the new manager interviews/conversations during career mode are a thin way to address player morale, which is a system that behaves erratically. Some players demand more playing time when they've already been in the starting lineup for months. The career-mode A.I. also falters in managing its rosters correctly, keeping the transfer market stocked, and fielding the right lineup alongside you in the player-centric version of career mode.

FIFA may be more popular than ever, but FIFA 20 is a standard bearer with no clear focus. The gameplay comes up just short of carrying the title, and while Ultimate Team is engaging in its own way, it's the same grind it's always been. The next-generation of home consoles is approaching, and I can't tell if EA has run out of ideas or is running out the clock. » **Matthew Kato**

» **Concept**
Add a new small-side mode called Volta, along with other changes throughout the game

» **Graphics**
Player faces look pretty good, but their facial expressions are limited to the stoic end of the emotion spectrum

» **Sound**
The soundtrack is well-suited to the Volta locations around the world

» **Playability**
It's worth learning the variety of dribbling options due to their utility in different situations

» **Entertainment**
FIFA 20's finer gameplay moments are overshadowed by the series' overall malaise

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

Untitled Goose Game

The joys of goosing around

Style 1-Player Puzzle **Publisher** House House **Developer** House House **Release** September 20 **Rating** E

7.5

Switch • PC • Mac

» **Concept**
Be a goose out on the town, making mischief and toying with humans

» **Graphics**
Outside of a few hiccups like clipping issues, the simplistic and colorful art style is pleasing and fits the tone well

» **Sound**
Tense classical music plays if a human catches you in the act, appropriately adding to the frenzy of chase scenes

» **Playability**
Easy to pick up and play, though sometimes it can be hard to pick up items when they're close to one another

» **Entertainment**
Untitled Goose Game leans into its lighthearted, silly elements, providing plenty of chuckles and capturing the joy of figuring out how to mess with people

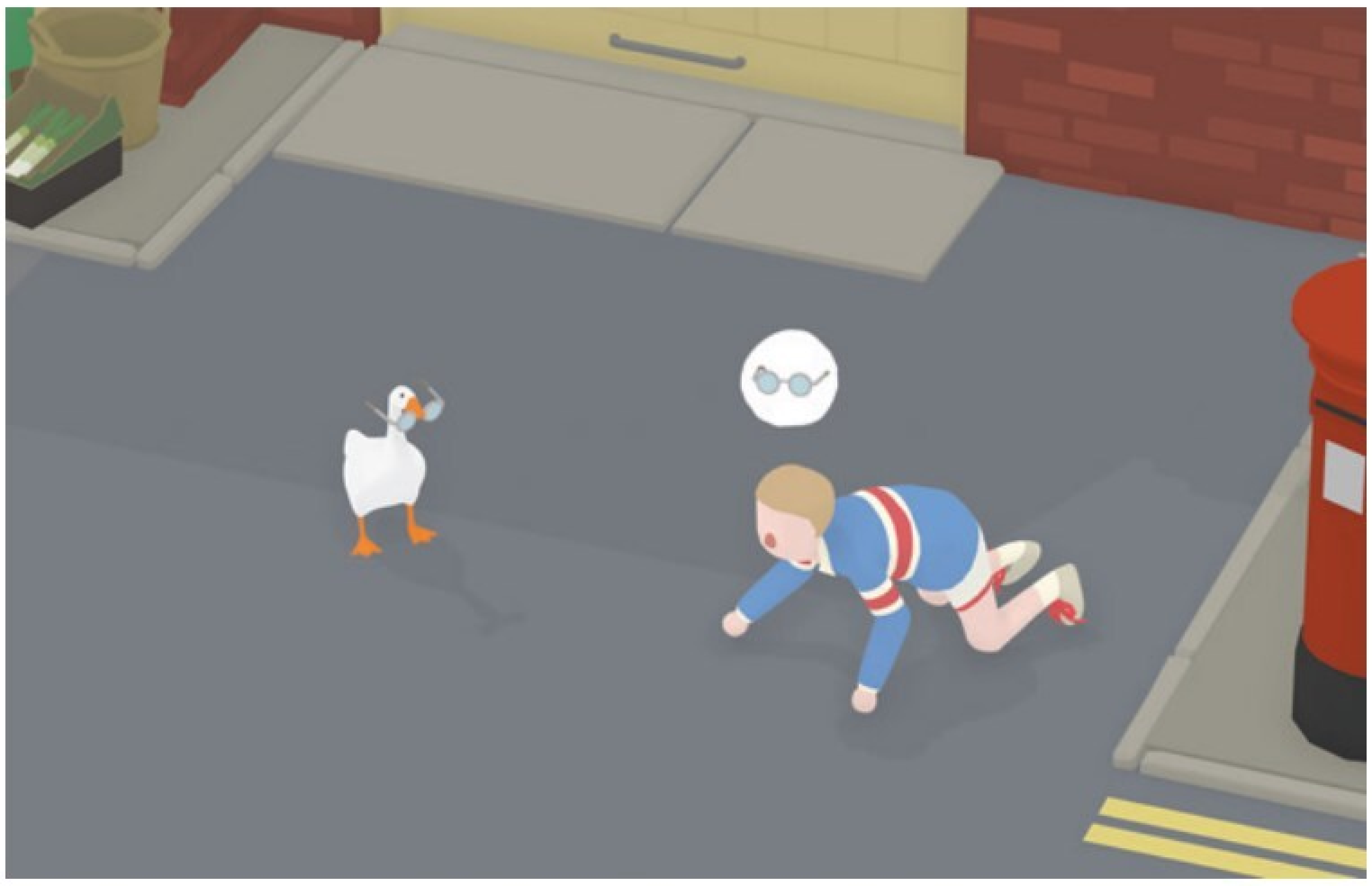
» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Making mischief can be fun, but imagine doing it as one of nature's biggest pests: a goose. Untitled Goose Game is a simple-but-amusing experience about being a goose and harassing unsuspecting humans. While there's something charming and delightful about that, the game shows all its cards upfront and never reaches outside the initial thrill of the premise. Untitled Goose Game is a lighthearted jaunt that I'm glad I took, but it left me without much of a lasting impression as the credits rolled.

Whether they're lazily meandering across the road in front of your car, chasing unsuspecting children, or leaving their "presents" on sidewalks, geese can be real jerks. This is why assuming the role of one and doling out the inconveniences is so satisfying. Your goal is to advance through different areas of a town by completing objectives, which nudge you toward your evil deeds. Maybe you need to steal items for your goose picnic, or chase a terrified boy into a phone booth. You accomplish this with only what nature gave you: your beak to honk and pick up items, and your wings to get attention.

Untitled Goose Game combines light stealth and puzzle elements. As a goose, you need to watch people's routines and routes, looking for things like tables and decks to hide under. You can also pick up items and place them wherever as a way to distract humans, which is essential; if you get caught, they chase you out of the area and take back whatever item you've stolen. Every place becomes its own puzzle, forcing you to think like a goose to complete some of the tasks, such as pretending to be a statue, or honking right as someone is about to do something to startle them for hilarious results. Some of your actions are just plain devious and depend on careful timing, like pulling a chair out from under someone right before they're about to sit down. All of this is plenty of fun, especially as you watch the reactions and consequences of your actions, like causing two neighbors to argue or seeing a lady who was shooing you break her broom.

You quickly fall into your routine of raising hell, and watching townspeople chase you as you waddle away for dear life is a sight to behold. Some puzzles take additional effort and can't even be completed until you gain access to a new area and go back later. Once the credits roll, you also get new, more complex objectives in the same areas for replayability; some hijinks even have timed conditions for added pressure. That being said, Untitled Goose Game is a condensed experience, and the first run only takes a few hours. I don't have a problem with short games, but even at that length, your tasks get repetitive by the end. There are only so many times you can steal items, move things from one side of the area to the other, and run from townsfolk. Also, for all this frenzy, nothing really stands out as over-the-top silly or extremely memorable. The gags are fairly standard and safe, and only a couple post-game objectives are intricate enough to require serious thought, which is disappointing.



Untitled Goose Game is a great concept, and ends in the same charming way it started. Pranking people is fun, and doing it as a goose just adds to the thrill. Most people will play it for the silly premise, complete it in a few hours, and go on their merry way without touching it again. If you just want to mess with people as a goose, here's your chance – but the shallowness and repetition hold it back from being a truly engaging game. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Death Stranding

The wanderer

7

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** Kojima Productions **Release** November 8 **Rating** M

PS4

» Concept
Transport cargo to and fro in a beautiful-but-convoluted world from Metal Gear creator Hideo Kojima

» Graphics
The details on everything from the logos to the environment are amazing, bringing to life this strand of the multiverse

» Sound
Most of the triple-A voice talent does a great job. I also enjoyed the relatively incidental sounds such as a blaring alarm or the rustle of Sam's gear

» Playability
Apart from an occasional delay in bringing up a newly equipped weapon's reticle, combat works fine. This includes melee combat, which does not have an enemy lock-on

» Entertainment
The pillars of gameplay, combat, and story all bear the mark of creator Hideo Kojima, but none of them stand out or carry the experience

» Replay Value
Moderately high

The mystery around Death Stranding has piqued everyone's curiosity as to the game's true nature. Part of this is down to the creator himself, Hideo Kojima, who has consistently obfuscated his titles with complex stories, themes, and the personal fancies of an auteur. It's also due to the incredulous feeling that there must be more to the game than what we've seen so far. Surely players must do more than transport cargo – a video game trope in and of itself. But Death Stranding (whose main character is named Sam Porter Bridges, no less) is unable to muster significance.

In order to rebuild America after a mysterious event that has blown a crater in the middle of the country and destroyed society as we know it, Sam treks across the land delivering supplies and connecting pockets of survivors. Doing so requires loading Sam up with packages of various sizes, weights, and possibly mission-ending stipulations – such as breaking fragile equipment and even delivering a pizza correctly.

I was initially frustrated by the teeter-totter nature of keeping my balance while traversing rocky, moss-covered landscapes. As I leveled up and became proficient in my movements (the terrain is thankfully consistent in terms of what does and doesn't trip you up), I realized the fight to stay upright isn't the fundamental problem with the core gameplay concept. The real issue is that Death Stranding's gameplay really is as simple as it appears to be, and the elements around it – the story, combat, and lackluster mission objectives – aren't satisfying enough to anchor the title and get players invested.

Death Stranding has optional side missions and ways to build up the infrastructure of the world, such as making roads and other helpful structures, but the core delivery loop doesn't branch out in more interesting directions. Your objectives are straightforward and unsurprising; they don't expand Sam's interaction with the world, nor do they require novel resourcefulness. It's all about the journey, as they say, but when the journey feels dull, that's not a good thing.

Combat is also part of Sam's travels, but it's not demanding or engaging. Multi-dimensional spirits called BTs rise from the ground and apparate from the air, but they feel more like nuisances than challenges – similar to random encounters in an RPG that cause you to swear more than lick your chops. Marauders called MULEs get physically tougher and have guns and trucks to hunt you down, but defeating them is easy, whether using guns, melee blows, or stealth. Don't expect the ingenuity or problem-solving required in the Metal Gear series; enemies' A.I. routines and reactions don't enliven your interactions with them or encourage experimentation.

Sure, it's fun to knock marauders down with a piece of luggage in your hand, but you can't drive them from an area, their encampments are basic, and their loot (unless tied to a specific mission) isn't particularly enticing since the items can be found elsewhere in the world. Combat is non-essential to the point that plain hoofing it is as effective as any weapon when dealing with both BTs and MULEs. Even the boss battles, if they can even be called that, are simple encounters of shooting and evading over multiple rounds. They lack the inventiveness and thrill of Kojima's previous efforts, to say nothing of other games. This is a shame, because you can fabricate some pretty useful equipment, like grenade launchers and camouflage rocks you can hide under, despite an absence of compelling situations in which to apply them.

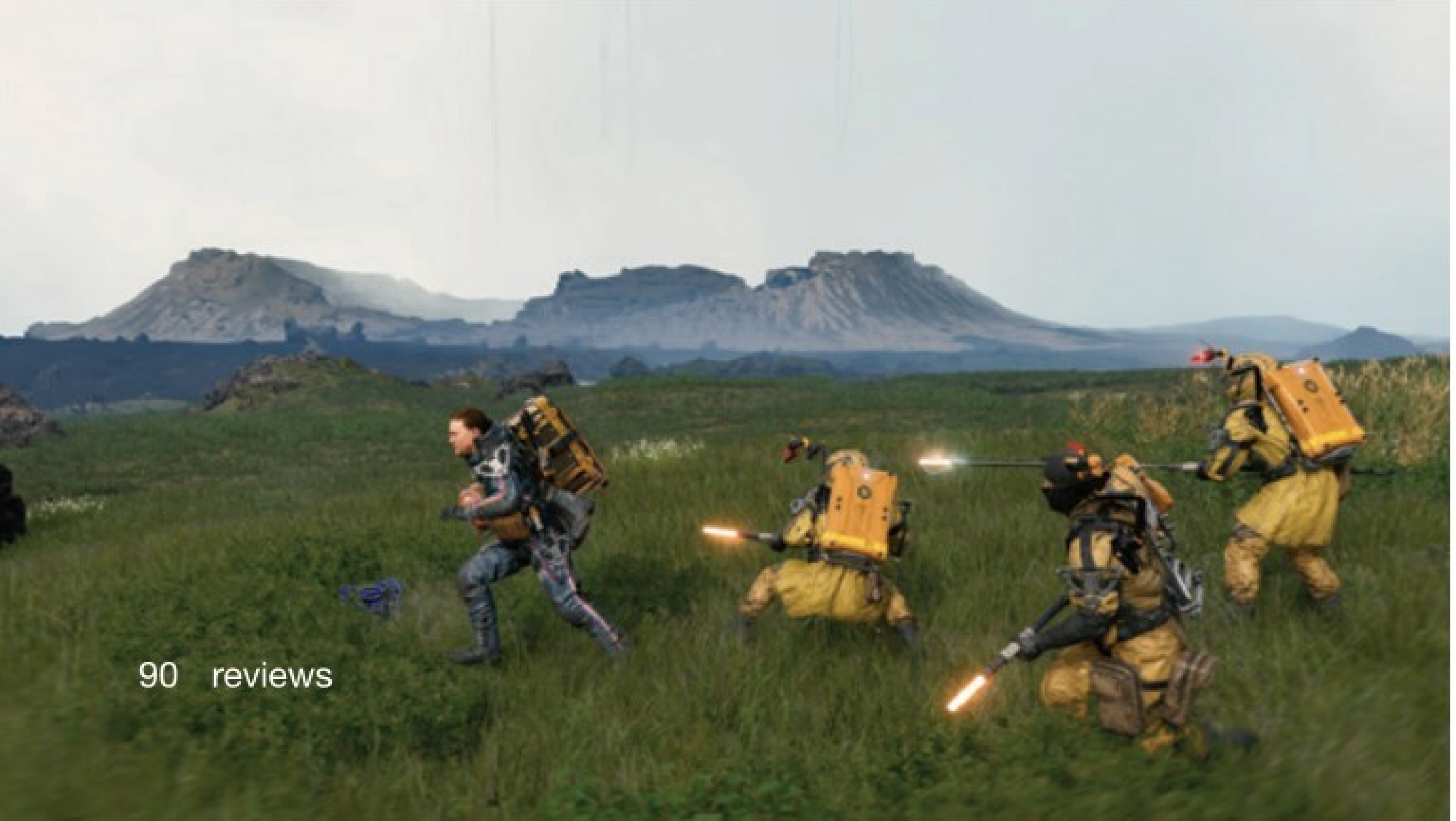
Overall, Death Stranding's intertwining systems are well thought out. Rain and snow (called Timefall) damage everything they touch, so I like the sense of urgent survival when the weather report shows precipitation on the way. Building zip-lines and safe houses in useful areas is satisfying, especially since they augment the overall network of nodes that keep you supplied and aid your travels.

Death Stranding's online connectivity is one of the game's strengths, not only because other real-life players add useful items like ladders and warning signs to your world, but because it achieves what it tries to do: It creates bonds. I liked knowing I was helping others when I erected a bridge or anchored a rope at a key location, and enjoyed giving others praise for their efforts via the like system. Regardless, this sentiment wanes amidst the larger morass of routine.

That the game ultimately comes up short is unfortunate, because there were times when I was spurred on to complete my delivery mission. Coming over a ridge, reflecting on how far I'd come and knowing that I just had to make it across one final expanse before delivering my cargo felt like sweet relief at times. The game is also visually stunning, which helps when spending all that time traveling from one place to another.

Try as it might, Death Stranding's story doesn't shore up its faults. It's the normal Kojima mix of twists-and-turns, tropes, and overbearing themes, but at least I like that it explores real-world topics like the theory of multiple dimensions and key events in the history of the planet's biodiversity. Like Sam himself, I often wasn't sure why I kept going in Death Stranding. Maybe there was a little bit of pride in another task checked off the list, another job done. Unfortunately, this added up to little reward in the end.

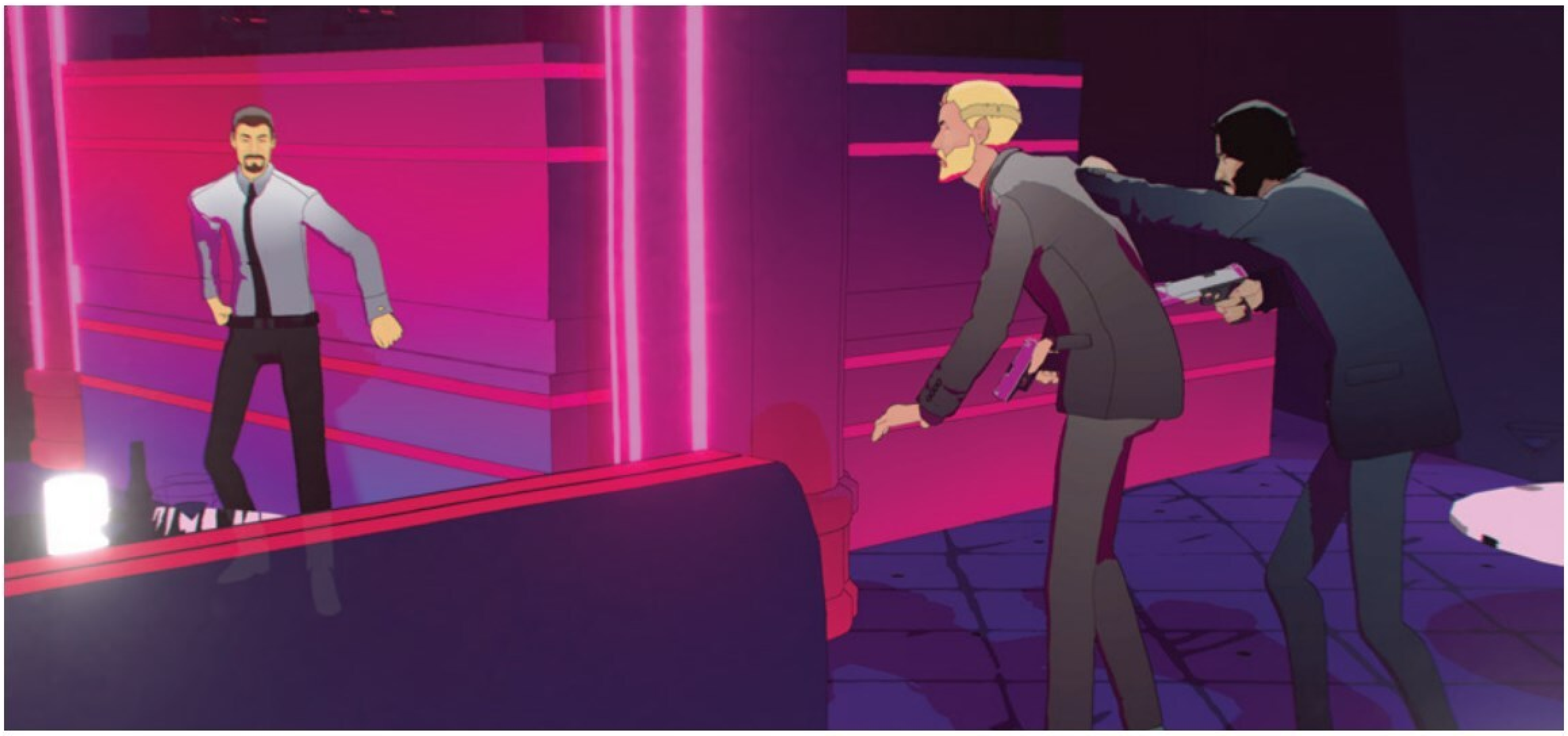
» Matthew Kato



John Wick Hex

A slow-motion ballet of blood

Style 1-Player Strategy **Publisher** Good Shepherd Entertainment **Developer** Bithell Games **Release** October 8 **Rating** M



John Wick walks into the room. Like a clockwork automaton, his movements are precise. His eyes effortlessly scan for danger. The gun in his hand snaps forward like the head of a serpent, spitting bullets like venom. Even more than most action heroes, John Wick exudes stone-cold confidence, and Bithell Games' strategy adaptation perfectly captures that style. I've rarely felt like such a capable assassin than while playing John Wick Hex. Even after a few repetitive encounters and an aggressive enemy A.I. tried to cut my ego back down to size, they couldn't diminish the overall high I felt playing Hex.

The John Wick franchise is all about speed and nonstop action, so Hex's choice to distill battles down to one-second chunks seems a bit odd. Fortunately, it works. In Hex, you navigate John Wick through a series of seedy underbellies as he takes down a seemingly endless stream of mob thugs. Each time a new enemy enters Wick's field of view, the action stops and you have the opportunity to issue a new command. John Wick isn't a turned-based strategy game, but it offers some of that slow-paced, contemplative action. Yet magically, these slow-mo firefights feel as tense and hyperkinetic as a real-time shooter.

Most of my time with Hex was spent calculating the length of time it took for John Wick to complete each order. Firing a pistol takes a full 1.5 seconds, while shoving a nearby enemy takes 1.3 seconds, and parrying an attack takes only .5 seconds. Those time difference might sound relatively insignificant, but the difference between life and death is measured in nanoseconds. Some weapons also take longer to fire than others; lining up a shot with a shotgun consumes more time than the standard pistol, but it does significantly more damage. Fortunately, Hex does a fantastic job laying out the timeline for upcoming attacks, and I always knew what my foes were planning and how much time I had to retaliate. Wick is almost always faster than his enemies, but when three goons burst through a door, managing enemy timelines becomes an exciting juggling act.

I regularly felt outmanned and outgunned, but overcoming the odds feels amazing. In the span of only a few seconds I could parry one attack, then – while one foe was stunned – initiate a grappling takedown of another enemy, which would place me behind cover and allow Wick to narrowly avoiding incoming gunfire. Finding a few seconds to squeeze off your own attack is often harrowing, but stepping over a room full of fallen foes is incredibly satisfying.

Some of Wick's best attacks and defensive moves cost focus. For example, the dodge roll makes Wick incredibly hard to hit and allows him to quickly traverse the length of a room. Every time I ran out of focus mid-battle, I felt handicapped; much like reloading, finding time to replenish Wick's focus is tricky, but this adds a welcome wrinkle to the strategy.

Wick begins the game as a highly capable assassin, which means he doesn't have much room to grow. The tactics and strategies I used at the end of the game were the same ones I learned during the opening levels. Before each mission, you have the opportunity to purchase upgrades that improve your hit percentages or lower the focus cost for some moves, but these are temporary buffs and I often found it more useful to spend my coins on extra bandages and weapons instead.

Most of the challenge in the later levels comes from throwing more thugs your way or introducing more resilient enemies. When I did get overwhelmed, I was forced to start each level over from the beginning. Fortunately, these levels are relatively short, but I was frustrated to have to play through a level's early encounters repeatedly when I kept getting hung up near the end.

The narrative doesn't bring anything new to the table. Hex is set in a period before the films, when John Wick still works for The High Table and recounts a mission where he must hunt down and kill the lieutenants of a villain named Hex. This plot largely serves only to introduce a number of marks for John Wick to hunt down, and doesn't contribute much to the franchise's wider lore.

Despite those frustrations, I continually returned to John Wick Hex because the core mechanics are incredibly tight. Thanks to Hex's clever time management systems I always felt one step ahead of my enemies and capable of constructing the kinds of sophisticated close-quarters gunfights that make the films so exciting. John Wick Hex might hit the same note over and over again, but it's one incredible note. » **Ben Reeves**

8

PC • Mac

» Concept
Slow down John Wick's hyper-violent gunfights to create a series of tense strategic encounters

» Graphics
This dark, comic book aesthetic fits the tone of the universe. Sadly, a few jerky animations don't do this hitman justice

» Sound
Actors Ian McShane and Lance Reddick reprise their characters from the films, which adds some authenticity to the experience. John Wick is played as a silent hero, so no Keanu Reeves

» Playability
Hex expertly breaks down John Wick-style fights into a series of puzzle-like encounters, but your combat options don't expand much over the course of the game

» Entertainment
At its best, John Wick Hex makes you feel like a trained assassin, but those moments are interrupted by strings of repetitive action

» Replay Value
Moderate

Luigi's Mansion 3

Frights and delights

8.5

Switch

» Concept
Climb through a haunted hotel as Luigi on a spooky quest to save Mario, Peach, and the Toads from King Boo

» Graphics
Crisp visuals, great animations, and interesting floor themes create a colorful but spooky atmosphere

» Sound
Tunes fitting the action haunt the hotel as much as ghosts do, and the satisfying sounds made by the vacuum never grow old. However, the low-life warning sound is more annoying than stressful

» Playability
Sucking up ghosts and other items feels great, but clunky controls lessen the enjoyment

» Entertainment
Creative environmental puzzles and unique boss battles make this a rewarding experience from start to finish

» Replay Value
Moderate

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1 to 8-Player Action (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Next Level Games **Release** October 31 **Rating** E

After ridding several haunted mansions of their ghost infestations in the series' first two games, the taller, goofier brother of Nintendo's first family is ready for his biggest task yet: cleansing a whole haunted hotel. In Luigi's Mansion 3, our hero grabs ghosts and solves simple puzzles on a mission to defeat King Boo and rescue Mario, Peach, and the Toads. With themed floors full of fun environmental puzzles and a ton of exciting encounters, this hotel is well worth checking into.

As Luigi progresses through the hotel's 15 floors (and 2 basements), he encounters all manner of spirits, traps, and puzzles, which require him to use all the moves in his arsenal centered around his ghost vacuum. I appreciate how the puzzles and fights have you use Luigi's abilities in unexpected ways, often in conjunction with one another. Encounters have fun ways of pushing your expertise with Luigi's moveset, like one that had me dodging lasers with the vacuum's burst jump while searching for hidden ghosts with the dark-light flashlight before stunning them with a strobe and vacuuming them up.

The entire adventure is well-crafted, with environmental cues giving you just the right amount of breadcrumbs you need to feel like you discovered the hidden paths yourself. However, the clues sometimes fall too far on one end of the difficulty spectrum; I sometimes was hot on the trail of solving a puzzle when Professor E. Gadd would pipe in with too much information and spoil the discovery, while other times I aimlessly explored an area before finally finding what I needed to do. The secrets, which often involve rotating seemingly ordinary objects or looking in mirrors to reveal hidden items, are enjoyable to discover and encourage exploration in an otherwise linear experience.

Luigi's Mansion 3 also makes use of Gooigi, a slimy clone you can deploy to reach areas Luigi cannot. Gooigi can squeeze through grates, spikes, and drains, opening the door for fun puzzles revolving around opening passageways for Luigi. The floors all do fantastic jobs of hinting at new areas you can send him, with hidden grates and drains galore. You can only control one character at time, but switching between them is as simple as clicking the right stick. While the swap between the two is mostly smooth, it can be annoying when a heavy object or ghost requires you to use the suction power of both characters. Thankfully, a co-op partner can take control of Gooigi, which makes everything easier. Co-op play in story is a fun way to streamline the experience and tag team challenges, but single-player is still just as viable and entertaining.

Unfortunately, clunky controls prevent the game from being completely without frustration. A fixed camera, an omnidirectional right stick, and motion controls combine for an imprecise experience. While the plunger mechanic for pulling items often locks on, I had to experiment with different control schemes before I felt like I had a handle on Luigi's aim.

Once you do get a grip on the controls, the boss battles serve as a highlight of the story. From a shark ghost that possesses a pirate ship to a DJ that wields spinning vinyl records, I loved seeing the final challenge for each themed floor. While I don't want to spoil my favorite boss encounter, it pays homage to kaiju films of the past in hilarious and exciting ways.

If you're too scared to go alone, ScareScraper, an eight-player cooperative mode where you try and clear randomly generated floors of ghosts before the time expires, serves as the highlight to the multiplayer offerings. Banding together with the rest of your team to clear out the final few rooms as the timer screams toward zero is a blast. With a strict time limit, you need to be judicious with your exploration, but I love how rewarding a little poking around can be; a trap-detecting alarm or a map showing the locations of ghosts help immensely. Whether you have one other person to play with or a full lobby, ScareScraper is an exciting co-op multiplayer mode.

For a little friendly competition, you can visit the ScreamPark, where you clash in three minigames that feel ripped straight from the Mario Party series. I enjoyed the competitive ghost hunting and target practice games, but the one based on an annoying water section in the campaign wasn't fun in the story, and it's not much better here. These minigames can be fun diversions with a group of friends, but the story is definitely the main attraction here.

With unique puzzles, diverse floor themes, and exciting boss battles, Luigi's Mansion 3 is a spooky delight for players of all experience levels. Seasoned ghostbusters and rookie paranormal enthusiasts alike would do well to look into Luigi's latest eerie adventure. » **Brian Shea**

8.75 Magic: The Gathering Arena

Platform PC **Release** September 26 **Rating** T

If you're looking to play Magic, there's probably no better way than Magic: The Gathering Arena, and that says a lot. – Daniel Tack

8.5 Yooka-Laylee And The Impossible Lair

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
Release October 8 **Rating** E

With rock-solid controls and imaginative level design, I couldn't wait to see what awaited the chameleon/bat duo each time I entered a new area. Yooka-Laylee and the Impossible Lair is a superb 2D platformer with plenty to love for fans of the genre both new and old. – Brian Shea

7.75 Afterparty

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC **Release** October 29 **Rating** M

Afterparty poses questions you don't expect it to ask, and that's what ultimately made me satisfied with it – just don't expect a non-stop rager. As with most parties, there are high points combined with lulls. – Kimberley Wallace

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7 Grid

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release October 11 **Rating** E

The Grid series offers a fun, gorgeous racing experience, and I can see value in bringing it back. But this incarnation of the game performs the bare minimum of the reboot mandate when it should be doing so much more. – Matthew Kato

6.5 MediEvil

Platform PS4 **Release** October 25 **Rating** T

MediEvil still deserves to be heralded as a classic for its time and place in gaming, and I love how it looks in revitalized form on PlayStation 4. However, its gameplay is a relic of yesteryear. – Andrew Reiner

6.5 The Sojourn

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release September 20 **Rating** E

This first-person puzzle game gradually introduces new ideas, but reinforces each one to exhaustion through repetition, without the escalation that makes you feel like your understanding is evolving. – Joe Juba

6.5 Code Vein

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC **Release** September 27 **Rating** M

Combat lacks weight, fights are forgettable, and byzantine stages desperately try (and fail) to capture the things that make Souls-like games interesting. – Daniel Tack

7 Sayonara Wild Hearts

Platform PS4 • Switch • Apple Arcade
Release September 19 **Rating** E10+

I quite enjoyed looking at Sayonara Wild Hearts, even though interacting with it left me cold. In fact, I probably would have liked it just as much if it were just a short film. *– Jeff Cork*

8 The Legend Of Heroes: Trails Of Cold Steel III

Platform PS4 **Release** October 22 **Rating** T

Trails of Cold Steel III's strengths outweigh its weaknesses. While the story takes its sweet time to unfold, it offers a lot of shocking outcomes. I won't spoil anything, but I will say that things just keep heating up and I can't wait to see what's ahead. *– Kimberley Wallace*

8.5 The Surge 2

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release September 24 **Rating** M

The Surge 2 is notably better than its predecessor. Developer Deck13 Interactive sticks to its guns on what The Surge is, yet improves upon the predecessor's systems and flow to create a thrilling pursuit of power backed by excellent combat encounters. *– Andrew Reiner*

7 Indivisible

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release October 8 **Rating** T

Indivisible is full of ambitious ideas and uneven execution. When it succeeds, you see glimpses of the fantastic game it could have been – but those flashes never last long for the dream to take shape. *– Joe Juba*

8 Neo Cab

Platform Switch • PC • iOS
Release October 3 **Rating** T

The concept of being a driver and managing conversations to ensure a five-star rating is enticing on its own, but Neo Cab shines by adding intriguing layers, like a future where humans are increasingly losing themselves to technology. *– Kimberley Wallace*

5.5 Daemon X Machina

Platform Switch **Release** September 13 **Rating** T

While the game ostensibly scratches the itch for players who have longed for something like Armored Core on the Switch, it's a model that feels out of step with recent innovations in the sphere of action games.. *– Matt Miller*

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TRIVIA CORNER

by Game Informer staff

1. What Goblin merchants in World of Warcraft show up in force for the holidays?

A. Grooling Gummers

B. Racksacker Lackey Bandits

C. Smokywood Pastures

D. Present Poachers

2. What Destiny 2 weapon could best be described as a "chonky bow"?

A. Leviathan's Breath

B. Riskrunner

C. The Jade Rabbit

D. Sweet Business

3. What is the name of the upcoming League of Legends card game?

A. Legends of League of Legends

B. Legends of Runeterra

C. Legends of Bloodforged Battlecry

D. Legends of Runeworld

4. Why did Nintendo issue a special Mario Party gaming glove for the 1999 game?

A. It was one of the industry's first preorder bonuses

B. They wanted to give Nintendo Power subscribers a special thank-you gift

C. It was one in a series, along with Paper Mario and Smash Bros. gloves

D. As a response to players injuring their palms playing the Fly Guy minigame

5. In Assassin's Creed Origins, protagonist Bayek has a complicated relationship with his wife, Aya. What other name does she adopt by the end of the game?

A. Hassan

B. Cleopatra

C. Amunet

D. Juno

6. Pac-Man ghosts Blinky, Inky, Pinky, and Clyde are well-known. But other ghosts have shown up over the years. Which one of these names isn't a Pac-Man ghost?

A. Spooky

B. Ghost Witch of Netor

C. Tim

D. Sinky

7. Within the Destiny fiction, the Hive worship ancient worm gods. Which of the following is such an entity?

A. Yul, the Honest Worm

B. Eir, the Keeper of Order

C. Xol, Will of the Thousands

D. All of the above

8. HBO's adaptation of Watchmen is far from the first time the influential story made the leap from comic-book pages. What was the subtitle for the 2009 episodic game?

A. The Comedian's Last Laugh

B. More Tales From The Black Freighter

C. The End is Nigh

D. Nite Owl is the Rite Owl

9. What's the name of the heroic chef in the 1982 arcade game Burger Time?

A. Tony Baloney

B. Peter Pepper

C. Guy Fieri Sr.

D. Frank Furter

10. Which of these bosses is in Mega Man 2?

A. Wood Man

B. Duck Man

C. Key Man

D. Deadman

WHAT WOULD YOUR ANSWERS GET YOU IN A MAGICAL HOLIDAY REALM?

0-3 CORRECT:
You get a stocking full of Ouya games. Better luck next time!

4-6 CORRECT:
You score one present. It's a Sega Master System game!

7-9 CORRECT:
A fully loaded holiday ensemble with games for your consoles, PCs, and handhelds!

10 CORRECT:
You're the master of presents. You get every game ever! You're the king of all trivia! Take a bow!

Answers: 1 C, 2 A, 3 B, 4 D, 5 C, 6 D, 7 D, 8 C, 9 B, 10 A

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